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Grounds for Telling It:
Transnational Feminism and Canadian Women's Writing

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Résumé

Cette thèse explore les connections entre la littérature canadienne contemporaine féminine et le féminisme transnational. Le « transnational » est une catégorie qui est de plus en plus importante dans la critique littéraire canadienne, mais elle n'est pas souvent evoquée en lien avec le féminisme. À travers cette thèse, je développe une méthodologie de lecture féministe basée sur le féminisme transnational. Cette méthodologie est appliquée à la littérature canadienne féminine; parallèlement, cette littérature participe à la définition et à l'élaboration des concepts féministes transnationaux tels que la complicité, la collaboration, le silence, et la différence. De plus, ma méthodologie participe à la recontextualisation de certains textes et moments dans l'histoire de la littérature canadienne, ce qui permet la conceptualisation d'une généalogie de l'expression féministe anti-essentialiste dans la littérature canadienne.

J'étudie donc des textes de Daphne Marlatt, Dionne Brand, et Suzette Mayr, ainsi que le périodique *Tessera* et les actes du colloque intitulé *Telling It*, une conférence qui a eu lieu en 1988. Ces textes parlent de la critique du colonialisme et du nationalisme, des identités post-coloniales et diasporiques, et des possibilités de la collaboration féministe de traverser des frontières de toutes sortes. Dans le premier chapitre, j'explique ma méthodologie en démontrant que le périodique féministe bilingue *Tessera* peut être lu en lien avec le féminisme transnational. Le deuxième chapitre s'attarde à la publication editée par le collectif qui a été formé à la suite de la conférence *Telling It*. Je situe *Telling It* dans le contexte des discussions sur les différences qui ont eu lieu dans le féminisme nord-américan des dernières décennies. Notamment, mes recherches sur *Telling It* sont fondées sur des documents d'archives peu consultés qui permettent une réflexion sur les silences qui peuvent se cacher au centre du travail collaboratif. Le trosième chapitre est constitué d'une lecture proche du texte multi-genre « In the Month of Hungry Ghosts, » écrit par Daphne Marlatt en 1979. Ce texte explore les connexions complexes entre le colonialisme, le postcolonialisme, la complicité et la mondialisation. Le suject du quatrième chapitre est le film *Listening for Something…* (1994) qui découle d'une collaboration féministe transnationale entre Dionne Brand et Adrienne Rich. Pour terminer, le cinquième chapitre

explore les liens entre le transnational et le national, la région – et le monstrueux, dans le contexte du roman *Venous Hum* (2004) de Suzette Mayr.

Ces lectures textuelles critiques se penchent toutes sur la question de la représentation de la collaboration féministe à travers les différences – question essentielle à l'action féministe transnationale. Mes recherche se trouvent donc aux intersections de la littérature canadienne, la théorie féministe contemporaine, les études postcoloniales et la mondialisation. Les discussions fascinantes qui se passent au sein de la théorie transnationale féministe sont pertinentes à ces intersections et de plus, la littérature contemporaine féminine au Canada offre des interventions importantes permettant d'imaginer la collaboration féministe transnationale.

Mots-clés : littérature canadienne, féminisme transnational, collaboration, essentialisme, femmes, race, Dionne Brand, Daphne Marlatt, Suzette Mayr, Telling It

Abstract

This dissertation explores connections between contemporary Canadian women's writing and transnational feminism. The category of the transnational is increasingly important within Canadian literary criticism, but it is infrequently evoked in relation to feminism. Throughout this thesis, I develop a transnational feminist reading methodology that can be brought to bear on Canadian women's writing, even as the literature itself participates in and nuances transnational feminist mobilizations of concepts such as complicity, collaboration, silence, and difference. Furthermore, my transnational feminist reading strategy provides a method for the rehistoricization of certain texts and moments in Canadian women's writing that further allows scholars to trace a genealogy of anti-essentialist feminist expression in Canadian literature.

To this end, I read texts by Daphne Marlatt, Dionne Brand, and Suzette Mayr, alongside *Tessera*, a collectively-edited journal, and conference proceedings from the 1988 *Telling It* conference; these texts speak to national and colonial critique, post-colonial and diasporic identities, and the potentials of feminist collaboration across various borders. In the first chapter, I situate my reading methodology by arguing for a transnational feminist understanding of *Tessera*, a bilingual feminist journal that began publishing in 1984. My second chapter examines the collectively-edited publication that emerged from *Telling It* in the context of North American feminist evocations of difference in recent decades. Notably, my research on *Telling It* benefits from rarely-accessed archival material that grounds my discussion of the gaps and silences of collective work. In my third chapter, I perform a close reading of Daphne Marlatt's 1979 multi-genre text "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" as it explores the complex connections between colonialism, post-colonialism, complicity and globalization. The subject of my fourth chapter is the 1994 film *Listening for Something…*, a transnational feminist collaboration between Dionne Brand and Adrienne Rich. Finally, my fifth chapter discusses the place of the transnational in relation to the regional, the national – and the monstrous in the context of Suzette Mayr's *Venous Hum*.

In all of these close textual readings, my dissertation asks how Canadian women writers represent, theorize, and critique the kinds of collaboration across differences that lie

at the heart of transnational feminist action. My research is therefore located at the crossroads of Canadian literature, contemporary feminist theory, and postcolonial and globalization studies. The vibrant field of transnational feminist theory is relevant to this disciplinary intersection and, furthermore, contemporary Canadian women's writing provides important interventions from which to imagine transnational feminist collaboration.

Keywords : Canadian literature, transnational feminism, collaboration, essentialism, women, race, Dionne Brand, Daphne Marlatt, Suzette Mayr, Telling It

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Reading Feminism : Introduction and Overview

Listen listen with care class and color and sex do not define people do

not define politics a class society defines people by class a racist society

defines people by color We feminists socialists radicals define

people by their struggles against the racism sexism classism that they

harbor that surrounds them.
- Rosario Morales "We Are All in This Together"

This dissertation project began with a general desire to work on a topic that would locate itself at the critical intersections of Canadian literature, postcolonial theory and feminism. In fact, if I go even further back to the project description that I wrote in 2006, I see that I imagined my work at the crossroads of globalization studies, critical race and sex/gender theory, and Canadian postcolonial studies. As I began to revisit the textual traces of the 1988 Canadian women writers conference *Telling It*, I started to think about one of the central questions of contemporary feminism. It is a question that must concern itself with postcoloniality, racialization and globalization. How does feminist collaboration articulate itself now that women of colour feminists and postcolonial scholars have revealed the ethnocentrism, racism, and gender essentialism of much mainstream North American feminism? This is necessarily the prominent concern of transnational feminist theory

insofar as it is invested in feminist work located in different locations with a commitment to the recognition and investigation of those differences, however slippery the concept and articulation of "difference" may be. Searching library catalogues via the keywords "transnational feminism," I found that most of the prominent references were American. Indeed, many of the texts that constitute how we remember the advent of anti-essentialist and transnational feminisms are both American and decidedly literary.[1] Thus were coupled the two guiding questions of this project: how is the feminist "we" articulated in light of differences between women? And what kinds of readings of Canadian literature might be occasioned by that question in order to begin a genealogy of anti-essentialist and transnational feminist thought in Canadian women's writing?

With this perspective in mind, the literary texts at the core of this project were chosen to reflect a variety of genres and to span a number of decades and thematic concerns. Chronologically, they run from 1979 (Daphne Marlatt's "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts") to 2004 (Suzette Mayr's *Venous Hum*) and include a literary conference (*Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures*), a feminist journal (*Tessera*), a film that features poetry (*Listening for Something…: Dionne Brand and Adrienne Rich in Conversation*), a novel (*Venous Hum*), and a multi-genre text ("In the Month of Hungry Ghosts").[2] In some ways, I have avoided choosing texts that might most obviously lend themselves to

[1] For instance, this is the case (to varying degrees) of the work of Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, all of whom I discuss in this dissertation.

[2] To my surprise, Daphne Marlatt shows up in three of my chapters because of her involvement with both *Tessera* and *Telling It*, and because I perform a close reading of her "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts." Her prominence in my project was unplanned but testifies to the enormous work she has accomplished in the Canadian literary context. It is also interesting to note the substantial space devoted to her in a transnational feminist project because she is often identified as a poststructuralist feminist writer. As I discuss in my first chapter, the relationship between poststructuralism and feminist activism is subject to much debate. Marlatt's prominence in this thesis, along with the overall project of *Tessera*, contribute to the nuancing of that debate.

transnational feminist readings. For instance, Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, which I do not discuss in-depth here, would welcome such a reading given its portrayal of two Black lesbian women relating across varied class and geographical positionings. It also depicts the racialized and gendered experience of illegal immigration to urban Canada, thus engaging with one of the important issues of transnational feminist mobilization: the lived experience and state management of women crossing borders. The texts that I ultimately selected for my corpus deal with less overt border-crossings, thereby permitting me to elasticize the "transnational" of transnational feminism and to think critically about its self-definitions when read in light of specific texts. My goal is not to repeat the types of readings already underway in postcolonial Canadian criticism, although I draw most gratefully from that work; rather, I am interested in instances when a transnational feminist perspective might permit a surprising but appropriate re-reading or re-historicization of a Canadian literary moment or text.

Given the parameters of my project, there are certain themes and lines of questioning that can be traced throughout the dissertation, manifesting themselves differently in each chapter. For example, each chapter is concerned with how Canadian women writers exist in relationship one to another, as they articulate that themselves (as is the case within the *Tessera* collective or through Mayr's intertextual references to Margaret Atwood) or as I position them on an imagined genealogy of anti-essentialist and transnational feminist thought in Canadian literature (by arguing for the timely and innovative features of *Telling It* and "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts"). Racialization is also a recurrent topic: Marlatt and Adrienne Rich address whiteness and privilege, Lee Maracle speaks to the *Telling It* participants of the insistent spectre of colonization, Mayr

portrays the politics of the visible in diasporic populations, and Godard reflects on the elision of race in the early days of *Tessera*. Collaboration is another important keyword. On the one hand, I anticipated its prominence, given that feminism as a social movement relies on collaborative work toward social justice and gender equality. On the other hand, I was somewhat surprised and completely delighted to find that my literary corpus is also investigating the nature of collaboration, whether it be through the bridge-building metaphorics of *Telling It*, the bilingual praxis of *Tessera*, the cross-border conversations of *Listening for Something…*, or the satirical scenes of community life in *Venous Hum*. Finally, it is also my hope that all of these chapters (of which I provide an overview below) exhibit close, responsible and productive readings of these remarkable literary texts.

In my first chapter, I explain what it means to bring a reading inspired by transnational feminism to a text or moment in Canadian literature. The movement implied by this previous sentence is in some ways exactly what this thesis is meant to contest. That is, we cannot "bring" transnational feminism "to" Canada. This is impossible for two reasons: first, the transnational does not exist in an outside, non-national space and it therefore resides in the Canadian national imaginary through the always already accomplished intervention of the global in the local (Massey 115, 118). Second, transnational feminist theory is not something to be imported into Canadian literary criticism in a unidirectional flow; Canadian literature can perform transnational feminist critique and contribute constitutively to the body of transnational feminist theory more commonly associated with American scholarship. As a way into these concepts, I begin by reviewing how the adjective "transnational" already operates in Canadian literary criticism in order to highlight the space that exists for transnational feminist reading. To demonstrate

what I mean by "transnational feminist reading," the bulk of this first chapter is devoted to a consideration of the bilingual feminist journal *Tessera*, which began publishing in 1984. My reading of the intentions behind *Tessera* (especially as they are articulated in its early editorials and retrospective essays) demonstrates the methodology that guides this thesis. I articulate that methodology explicitly toward the end of this first chapter, describing how I read with the core concerns of anti-essentialist and transnational feminism in mind, while also exploring how the literature itself nuances my understanding thereof.

My second chapter is built around a consideration of a literary conference that took place in 1988 and the 1990 publication that resulted from that event, entitled *Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures*. In order to situate *Telling It* in the context of North American feminist thought of its era, I describe the concern with differences between women that was (and continues to be) prominent in feminist circles, especially via critiques from women of colour and postcolonial feminist scholars. I demonstrate how the conversations of *Telling It* partook of these concerns in innovative ways, arguing that it might figure on a genealogy of anti-essentialist and transnational feminist thought in Canadian women's writing. This means noting how the women of *Telling It* articulate racial, sexual and cultural differences between themselves, how colonial history haunts their interactions, and how their attempts at anti-essentialist feminist work partially fail when one of the primary participants controversially excludes herself from future collaboration. An investigation into that moment of failure took me to the literary archives in Ottawa and this chapter includes my reflections on the ethics of that archival research.

These first two chapters establish the literary and feminist historical contexts that inform chapter three's thorough reading of Daphne Marlatt's 1979 multi-genre text "In the

Month of Hungry Ghosts." Although this is the earliest literary work considered here, it is replete with investigations of the postcolonial and globalized conditions that inform contemporary feminism. As she grapples with the politics of locations (locations that are Canadian and Malaysian, social and racial, colonial and postcolonial) and the gendered roles of *memsahib* and *amah*, Marlatt's narrator is especially alert to the concept of complicity, which is a crucial keyword for transnational feminism.

The focus of chapter four is a rarely-discussed film called *Listening for Something…: Dionne Brand and Adrienne Rich in Conversation*, which affords me the opportunity to read some of Brand and Rich's most important poems in conversation with each other. Although collaboration is a theme that emerges repeatedly throughout my dissertation, this is the chapter in which I deal explicitly with the metaphorics of collaboration and collaboration theory as they manifest in this poetic and cinematic transnational feminist project. I return to the feminist concept of the politics of location in order to explore how Brand and Rich present their own situatedness. Their project in this film crosses national and racial borders and I contend that the resonances between and through their poetry perform anti-essentialist theorizing.

In my final chapter, I offer a close reading of Suzette Mayr's 2004 novel, *Venous Hum*, which interrogates essentialist notions of national, regional, sexual and diasporic citizenship from a third wave feminist perspective. I argue that Mary's text speaks to contemporary feminist concepts of heteronormativity and intersectionality and that it challenges some of the conventional notions of Canadian literary criticism. *Venous Hum* is a text that can be positioned in terms of both continuity and newness vis-à-vis other works

by Canadian women. I mention some of them in order to further contribute to my idea of a genealogy of Canadian literary feminism.

Finally, a word on the title of this dissertation. "Telling It" obviously refers to the conference and publication under examination in my second chapter, but it also functions as a synecdoche for feminist projects overall and emphasizes my interest in the verbal and textual (literary, "telling") articulations of those projects. As I discuss in my first and second chapters, literary analysis has been central to the enunciation and self-definition of contemporary feminist thought, and this project is invested in those precedents. This thesis is also called "Grounds for Telling It" because I am wondering about the bases (grounds) for feminist collaboration that can be articulated post-difference revolution, post-Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes," beyond Audre Lorde's proclamation that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," and in light of Adrienne Rich's "politics of location."[3] Moreover, I am interested in adding some Canadian names to the above list, not out of sense of nationalism but in order to re-read and historicize literary texts and literary historical moments that exhibit and nuance concepts of anti-essentialism and trans-difference collaboration. To the extent that my project accomplishes this, it is indeed located at the crossroads of feminism, postcolonial theory and Canadian literary criticism, participating in the growing evocation of the "transnational" in literary studies, and contributing to a revalorisation of the important feminist work of Canadian women writers.

[3] I discuss Chow's evaluations of the "difference revolution" in chapter four, Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" and Lorde in chapter two and elsewhere, and Rich's "politics of location" primarily in chapter four.

Chapter One : Transnational Feminist Reading and *Tessera*

"Only a study at once theoretical and localized can address the paradoxes inherent in transnational feminist practices."
- Smaro Kamboureli, "Transnational Subjectivities" (219)

"Look at the texts, look around and through them. What you see in them is what you bring to them. Speculate. Re-play the specular scene of self as reader. Read the book backwards as well as forwards. Read it sideways, to see what each text borders on, and what differences that touching might make. Turn it upside down."
- Barbara Godard, "Women in Letters (Reprise)" (304)

The Transnational in Canadian Literature

What kinds of historical moments, radical scholarship and activist projects spring to mind when transnational feminism is evoked? We might think, for instance, of the United Nations' World Conferences on Women where, in 1975 in Mexico City, Third World feminists publicly denounced First World feminists' ethnocentrism (Heitlinger 10), and where, in 1995 in Bejing, more than 3000 organizations participated in the women's NGO forum (compared to 114 in 1975) (Hawkesworth 15). Or we might imagine, for example, a certain kind of scholarship: for instance, the type of analysis that would trace the influence of Christian fundamentalism as it affects women's reproductive health worldwide through the funding choices of the American Republican party (Grewal and Kaplan "Introduction" 20). Or we might picture something like Rachel Silvey and her American and Indonesian

students' work with migrant workers and migrant rights activists in Indonesia to produce the film *Interstitched* (Silvey 192). In envisioning these examples of transnational feminism, we might feel, justifiably, rather distant from the texts and critical debates that constitute Canadian literature. This chapter (and indeed, this dissertation project as a whole) aims to interrogate, inhabit and activate that supposed distance. I develop a transnational feminist reading strategy for Canadian women's writing whereby literary texts are "illuminated" rather than "oppressed" (Godard et al. "SP/ELLE" 12), moments of literary history are situated on a Canadian genealogy of transnational feminist thought, and the anti-essentialist interventions of Canadian women writers are seen as constituting and responding to transnational feminism.

In this chapter, I elaborate on this approach by reading the early editions of the bilingual feminist Canadian literary journal *Tessera*. *Tessera* can be linked to transnational feminism in three broad ways. First, as a collective project, *Tessera* can be remembered as inherently and literally transnational itself in that it recognized and questioned the perceived (and contested) gaps between Québécois and English-Canadian feminist writers who were often inspired by feminist theory imported from other national context(s), such as France. Second, *Tessera* and transnational feminism engage with some of the same fundamental concerns, such as the possibilities of collaborating without collapsing differences between women, the necessity for self-critique, and the need to understand feminism in conjunction with anti-imperialism. Third, editorials authored by the *Tessera* collective, as well as retrospective essays on *Tessera* from founding members, demonstrate that *Tessera* situated itself vis-à-vis feminists debates of the time, debates that were absolutely formative for transnational feminism. Throughout the bulk of this chapter, I

unpack and detail these three connectors between the aims of *Tessera* and the larger body of transnational feminist studies. My approach to *Tessera* comprises multiple historical and textual layers. I draw on the early editions of the journal itself, and especially the collectively-authored editorials which function as moments of self-definition for the editorial team. I also incorporate texts in which founding members, especially Barbara Godard, revisit and therefore reread *Tessera*. My own critical perspective is inevitably the enveloping layer. I mention it here explicitly in keeping with the transnational feminist call for critical self-situation (Heitlinger 13, Kamboureli "Transnational" 220-222, Razack "Your Place" 42).[4] Indeed, much of the work of this chapter is about situating my methodology in relation to established definitions of transnational feminism and in relation to the evocations of the transnational already underway in Canadian literary criticism. It should be clear at the close of this chapter that *Tessera* functions not only as an example of my reading strategy, but as a formative site of my critical perspective insofar as it is teaching me to think/read transnational feminism and Canadian literature outside of their boxes.

Canadian literary criticism provides a productive venue in which to think about the transnational. The prefix "trans" has particular resonances in Canadian literature, many of which have been explored recently in the context of the TransCanada conferences and publication.[5] In Canada, "Trans" evokes the Trans-Canada highway and pipelines which function as symbols of nationalistic integrationism beyond their literal existence on the map of Canada (Kamboureli "Preface" xii; Brydon "Metamorphoses" 13). In Canada, "trans"

[4] Self-situating and the politics of the critic's own location is a subject to which I return in chapters three and four.

[5] The TransCanada Institute at the University of Guelph organized a series of three conferences on "Literature, Institutions, Citizenship," which took place in 2005, 2007 and 2009. The first conference resulted in the publication *Trans. Can. Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature* (2007).

also evokes Roy Kiyooka's 1975 *Transcanada Letters* (Kamboureli "Preface" xii; Siemerling "Trans-Scan" 135). Kamboureli notes that for the feminist diasporic critic working in Canada, "trans" must be understood as "*across, on the other side, through*" in order to be useful; when "trans" is equated with "a gesture *beyond*" it moves away from locales and specifics and becomes ahistorical and totalizing ("Transnational" 219). More recently, Winfried Siemerling has also engaged with the adverbs suggested by "trans," arguing that a Trans-Canadian perspective must "go 'through' Canada in the double sense of both across and beyond, while avoiding any 'trans' that suspends consciousness, 'passes over,'… or 'departs from' its situated problematics ("Trans-Scan" 131). In their evaluations of the major utilisations of the term "transnational" in the (American) academy, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan confirm that what Kamboureli and Siemerling caution against has come to pass: one of the most common uses of "transnational" does indeed conflate it with a borderlessness "*beyond*" nations that eschews the postcolonial and is "strangely ahistorical" ("Global" 663-664). When the "trans" of transnational signifies "*across, on the other side, through*" rather than "*beyond*," it sparks all kinds of questions in the context of a literature whose institutionalization has been so entwined with nationalism. What would it mean to read "*across*" the national, to imagine "*the other side*" of the national, or to see "*through*" the national within a nationally-defined construct such as "Canadian literature"? Indeed, literary scholars are presently wondering about the relevance of the transnational in the domain of Canadian literature, as evidenced by recent publications such as *Canada and its Americas: Transnational Navigations*, the 2010 collection edited by Winfried

Siemerling and Sarah Phillips Casteel, and Kit Dobson's 2009 *Transnational Canadas: Anglo-Canadian Literature and Globalization*.[6]

These two texts demonstrate the multiple directions in which a term such as transnational can be mobilized. It is clear from their introduction that Siemerling and Casteel use the transnational primarily in reference to hemispheric or inter-American literary studies and they urge Canadian scholars to join this literary conversation by mining texts for their transnational characteristics and interpreting comparatively in light of works from other nations (7-8, 25). Dobson is much less likely than Siemerling and Casteel to evoke hemispheric American studies, and instead defines his transnational approach as a mix of Marxist, postcolonial and poststructuralist theory (xiv). So while Siemerling and Casteel reference inter-American scholars such as Nina M. Scott and Carolyn Porter (5-6), Dobson understands transnational studies in terms of the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (whom he critiques in his chapter "Transnational Multitudes") (xv; 150-154). Because the Siemerling and Casteel collection is framed in terms of hemispheric studies, the essays therein are much more likely to offer transnational comparative readings, whereas all of the fictional texts that Dobson discusses are easily recognizable as Canadian literature, from Margaret Atwood to Michael Ondaatje to Roy Miki. The transnational quality of Dobson's approach lies not in his choice of literature but in his critical perspective, which draws on and critiques a range of internationally-renowned scholars (such as Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Hardt and Negri) and, more

[6] The latest volume of *Canadian Literature* provides further examples of the interest in the "transnational." It includes an article on Spanish civil war poetry entitled "From Transnational Politics to National Modernist Poetics" (Vautour 44), Alison Calder's thoughts on the relationship between globalization, transnational studies and regionalism ("What" 114), and Deena Rymhs' evocation of the "translocal," a term closely related to the transnational through its investment in "inter-, intra-, extra- latitudes, emphasizing how the local still bears relevance in an age of global imaginaries and state hegemonies" (124).

importantly, identifies the already transnational characteristics of Canadian texts, Canadian space, and the Canadian scholarly and publishing industries.

Two other texts, read side-by-side, provide another example of the different ways that the transnational is evoked in Canadian literary criticism. In Mildred Mickle's work on the transnational characteristics of Lillian Allen's poetry, she uses "transnational" as a descriptor equivalent to "diasporic." For her, "transnationalism is a state of being that is rooted within multiple situations of physical location – reconciling the land where one lives currently with other places that have shaped a person – and mental location – the preoccupation with memories of past and present" (266). Her equation of transnationalism and diaspora corresponds with one of the five main ways that the transnational is defined in academia, according to Grewal and Kaplan (although their survey is based on the US academy) ("Global" 664). Writing specifically about "minority literatures in Canada" (98), Lily Cho staunchly disagrees with the equation of transnational and diasporic. For her the "transnational subject" is one who travels with ease ("multiple-passport carrying") while the "diasporic subject" struggles with having left "home" and has a "perpetual sense of not quite having left and not quite having arrived" (99). Furthermore, Cho argues that not all diasporas are transnational, and that her understanding of the difference between transnational and disaporic citizenships is the result of her commitment to the "histories of dislocation and racialization" that define her readings of minority literatures (98, 100). Mickle and Cho are *both* aware of the "histories of dislocation and racialization" that must inform literary criticism, but they disagree on the appropriate vocabulary to the extent that Mickle assumes to be synonymous what Cho argues is practically antonymous.

Although Mickle and Cho offer specific definitions for their uses of the term transnational, it sometimes seems like transnational is an adjective that can define almost anything that is remotely connected to migration or globalization. For instance, in a recent doctoral dissertation, Tara Lee writes of transnational Canada, transnational networks, transnational shame, transnational stigma, transnational disorder, etc., and she notes that transnational is a signifier with a constantly shifting signified (20, 21, 22, 36, 49, 51). My own understanding of the term "transnational" is shaped by the way that it operates in the domain of "transnational feminism." In some ways, the evocation of the transnational in feminist criticism operates similarly to the more general use of the transnational in literary studies. First, both define themselves against another type of approach. While Canadian scholars who engage in transnational literary studies would situate themselves in opposition to a nation-based approach to literature, transnational feminists also define their perspective against another – that of global feminism or Western liberal feminism (Grewal and Kaplan "Introduction" 17, Alexander and Mohanty "Introduction" xviii-xix). Second, both feminist and more general conceptions of the transnational take as their objects of study those actual or fictional places, people or phenomena that are complexly connected to other places, people or phenomena in other nations, specifically through the workings of globalization. Obviously, the feminist approach to these connections focuses on the operations of sex and gender therein. (It is my general impression that because the spotlight is on women, the nation does not feel like it is the primary subject of analysis to the extent that it sometimes does in more general transnational studies.) Third, in both feminist criticism and Canadian literary criticism, the transnational perspective is often seen as enabling an informed,

ethical, resistant stance.[7] The resistant potential of the transnational perspective is even clearer in its feminist manifestations because of the emancipatory project of feminism. Although a number of critics present transnational studies as an avenue toward greater understanding and potential resistance, it is important to remember that the adjective itself ("transnational") can have no inherent resistant potential or political position. As Alena Heitlinger points out, transnational feminism is not guaranteed to be transformative simply because of its proclaimed global outlook (10).

Despite overlaps in their understandings of the transnational, its operation within general literary transnational studies in Canada and in transnational feminism can be strikingly distinct. For example, the on-going transnational feminist conversations around issues of complicity and collaboration (terms that are fundamental to the work of this dissertation) are hardly prominent in more general literary transnational studies. I contend that transnational feminism offers reading strategies that can be brought to Canadian literature, and conversely, that Canadian literature can teach us how to think through some of the essential debates of transnational feminism. My contention is buoyed up by the fact that such readings are not currently being undertaken, despite the growing popularity of the transnational as a way to think about Canadian literary production (although there are some notable exceptions to this, such as the work of Smaro Kamboureli, as in her "Transnational

[7] This is clearly, and perhaps overly optimistically, expressed in a citation from a doctoral dissertation from Tara Lee of Simon Fraser University: "The nation is made up of transnational networks that it has previously overlooked, suppressed, and covered over with artificial stability. Once invisible people and relationships suddenly come to the forefront when the transnational removes the blinders of national thinking" (21). Dobson expresses a similar conviction, albeit in more hesitant terms: "A transnational mindset, however vexed, might play a role in resisting, for example, cynical deployments of difference as marketing tools in this country… Canada needs the transnational, in all of its configurations, as a means of looking to different scales in confronting political and social problems" (xviii; see also 140) The transnational approach, then, is meant to enable a informed ethical and resistant stance against injustices, specifically those wrought by nations and their complicity in global capitalist exploitation. John Clement Ball's reading of Catherine Bush's *The Rules of Engagement* clearly demonstrates this assumption (183-195).

Subjectivities: Travelling to Greece with Karen Connelly"). Based on the content of some of their contributors (none of whom reference feminism in the titles of their chapters), Siemerling and Casteel do state that their collection "carefully reconstructs contextual mediations, including those of nation and state (and of nation-defined literary institutions), as well as mediations of race, ethnicity, class, *and gender*" (24, emphasis mine) although gender is not a prominent concern of the collection. Dobson evokes transnational feminism specifically in his introduction, promising to think through the links between deconstructive politics and transnational feminism, especially as articulated by Gayatri Spivak (xiv-xv). Indeed, Dobson devotes a chapter to a "Critique of Spivakian Reason and Canadian Postcolonialisms" (79-90) in which he discusses "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and its 1999 rewriting (82-87). He thereby raises questions of self-representation and value, which he links to Canadian debates on canonicity and the co-optation of minority writing by dominant cultural and economic forces (87). Dobson also evokes transnational feminism in his chapter on Hardt and Negri, in which he draws on an article by Grewal and Kaplan to critique the gender-blindness of Hardt and Negri's multitude (153). Although I appreciate Dobson's book, his focus is elsewhere; a chapter on Spivak and a page referencing Grewal and Kaplan do not provide much of a framework for relating transnational feminism to Canadian literature.

In short, I am arguing that there is ample room for my project within the burgeoning relationship between Canadian writing and the transnational, where discussions of transnational feminism have been mostly absent thus far, although Canadian literary critics such as Lianne Moyes, Smaro Kamboureli, and Julia Emberley have done work that I would consider transnationally feminist (even when they do not label it as such).

Furthermore, I argue that transnational feminism offers not only a framework in which to think through literary texts and their transnational resonances, but also a perspective from which to reread Canadian literary history. This is akin to Dobson's project of rereading works related to the cultural nationalism of the centennial era from his transnational perspective (xvii, 4-5). Like Dobson and Siemerling and Casteel, I am convinced that transnational perspectives can occasion nuanced and interesting readings of literary texts. But rather than situating my work in hemispheric studies or transnational studies, I am interested in the already well-established field of transnational feminism for the unique ways in which it is teaching me to read and to historicize Canadian women's writing, as evidenced in this chapter.

Revisiting *Tessera*

Tessera traces its inception to the *Dialogue* conference that took place at York University (Toronto) in October 1981 (Godard et al. "SP/ELLE" 4; Marlatt *Reading* 9; Mezei 48). *Dialogue* is remembered as one of the first conferences on literary criticism to be held in Canada and as "one of the most successful literary and theoretical dialogues between the two cultures" of French and English Canada, and especially between English-speaking and Québécois feminist writers and academics (Godard "Introduction" i; Carrière 11). It resulted in the 1987 publication *Gynocritics/ Gynocritiques: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing* and sparked the connections and conversations that would lead to the founding of *Tessera.* Kathy Mezei and Daphne Marlatt recall hatching the idea for the journal on the way home from the *Dialogue* conference (Godard et

al. "SP/ELLE" 4). It concretised when the editorial collective (Barbara Godard, Daphne Marlatt, Kathy Mezei and Gail Scott) met together at the *Women and Words / Les femmes et les mots* conference in Vancouver in 1983 (Marlatt *Reading* 9; Mezei 48). Like *Dialogue*, *Women and Words / Les femmes et les mots* was another important meeting place for Québécois and English-Canadian feminist writers (Carrière 12). The West Coast Women and Words Society organized the conference and also formed an anthology committee, whose two editorial groups (one French, one English) collaborated on *Women and Words: The Anthology / Les Femmes et Les Mots: Une Anthologie*[8] (which is to be distinguished from the conference proceedings entitled *In the Feminine*). Indeed, *Dialogue*, *Women and Words / Les femmes et les mots* and *Tessera* are all examples of the increased interaction between Québécois and English-Canadian feminist writers that took place in the 1980s, especially around ideas of "writing in the feminine" or "écriture au féminin" (Andersen 127; Carrière 3-4, 11-13; McPherson xix).[9]

"Écriture au féminin" is the name given to experimental Québécois feminist writing of the 1970s and 1980s that explored what it means to write "from a woman's vantage point and experience, from a woman's body, and in a language that could be regarded as primarily woman-made" (Gould 4). Most often associated with the work of writers such as Nicole Brossard, France Théoret, Louky Bersianik, écriture au féminin is a term that

[8] This is how the title appears on the title page of the book. According to conventional rules of capitalization in French, the French portion of this title should read *Les femmes et les mots*. English-style capitalization seems to have been imposed here, presumably inadvertently. It seems a fitting instance of the way that well-intentioned bilingualism can falter and default toward an Anglophone majority, as I discuss later on in the context of *Tessera*.

[9] Although my focus in this chapter is on *Tessera*, it would be possible to read the transnational feminist characteristics of any of these instances of collaboration. The introduction to *In the Feminine*, for instance, makes repeated reference to transnational feminist questions about the operation of racism in feminist circles and the theorization of differences between women (12, 14, 15).

describes "writing with a feminist consciousness – writing that exposes/subverts the ideologies of prevailing culture and explores alternative spaces, values, and ideas" (Moyes "Nicole" 160). Écriture au féminin is an openly self-conscious practice, interested in the radical alterity of female subjectivity and the "theorizing and poetic rendering of female selfhood" (Carrière 50, 51, 54). "Writing in the feminine" is the English translation of "écriture au féminin" and its manifestations in English-Canadian literature are most often associated with Daphne Marlatt and Lola Lemire Tostevin, for instance. Similarities and differences between "écriture au féminin" and "writing in the feminine" were delineated by Godard in her "Mapmaking: A Survey of Feminist Criticism" (published in *Gynocritics/ Gynocritiques*) and have more recently been re-evaluated by Marie Carrière in her introduction to *Writing in the Feminine in French and English Canada*. Godard speaks of "the very real divergences in the concerns of English- and French-language feminists" (24) and traces the different influences of French, British and American theory in Canadian criticism (4, 7, 24). Carrière, speaking specifically about the differences between writing in the feminine and écriture au féminin, suggests that, differences notwithstanding, these explorations constitute one of the moments when the gap lessens between the two solitudes, "which in themselves are already plural anyway" (14).[10] As I will discuss below, members of *Tessera* who were engaged in "writing in the feminine" felt alienated by much other English-Canadian women's writing and were instead inspired by the "écriture au féminin" movement in Quebec; hence their interest in founding a journal like *Tessera*.

Born out of a collaborative, cross-cultural – and, as I argue, transnational – matrix, *Tessera* published its first four issues as guest editions of already established journals

[10] Numerous other scholars have also evaluated écriture au féminin and writing in the feminine. See, for example, Gould, Verduyn ("Relative(ly)"), and Von Flotow.

Room of One's Own (1984), *La Nouvelle barre du jour* (1985), *Canadian Fiction Magazine* (1986) and *Contemporary Verse II* (1988). Early issues of *Tessera* include experimental writing that often partakes of both fiction and theory and that centres around such keywords as translation, feminism, theory, language, doubleness, and the relationship between reading and writing. Summarizing the focus of *Tessera* for the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, Lianne Moyes writes that "several of the issues focus on the unruly borders between, for example, written and visual, literary and non-literary, popular and academic, feminist and queer" ("Tessera" 1096). The founding editorial collective of *Tessera* remained intact until Gail Scott's departure was announced in the eighth issue in 1990 (Godard "Thresholds" 9); by the fifteenth edition in 1993, all of the original members had taken their leave and *Tessera* continued under new direction (Binhammer et al. 5). Convinced of the on-going relevance of the questions addressed in *Tessera* – questions of feminism, language, and translation, for instance – and hoping to "engage the literary institution in a different publishing mode," Barbara Godard edited a book containing selected articles from the first ten years of *Tessera* (Godard "Women" 265). Entitled *Collaboration in the Feminine: Writings on Women and Culture from Tessera*, it also included Godard's thoughtful and thorough reflections on the creation and content of *Tessera*, its context and its significance ("Women of Letters (Reprise)" 258-306). She is acutely aware of her retrospective critical location and she welcomes the different readings that flow from looking back at texts from *Tessera* and reading them in the context of the 1994 publication. "Reframing the texts of *Tessera* through the changed angle of hindsight," she writes near the end of the essay, "[*Collaboration in the Feminine*] projects a virtual image of a textual effect and makes it available for a different reading" (303). Her closing

words invite the kind of reading that I perform in this chapter. They welcome and validate a project such as mine by offering these texts up for revisitation and rereading and by recognizing the constitutive and open-ended play that a critic brings to a text. Godard asserts that *Collaboration in the Feminine*'s subject "is never completed and fixed in the words of a single text because it is situated in the (dialogic) space between texts. It is into this space that the reader must project herself, throw herself into the speculative activity of interpretation" (303). She advises the reader to

> Look at the texts, look around and through them. What you see in them is what you bring to them. Speculate. Re-play the specular scene of self as reader. Read the book backwards as well as forwards. Read it sideways, to see what each text borders on, and what differences that touching might make. Turn it upside down. (304)

I quote her at length (and in epigraph) because her advice both inspires and endorses a transnational feminist reading of *Tessera*, which is necessarily interested in (in her words) borders and differences. Her concept of "looking around" a text resonates with my interest in the collective editorial apparatus that makes *Tessera* possible. For her to affirm that what critics see in texts is what they bring to them reminds me that I read for the transnational feminist characteristics of the *Tessera* project out of my desire to articulate a transnational feminist reading strategy. Godard remembers *Tessera* as being fundamentally formed out of a desire to imagine new – feminist – ways to discuss women's writing ("Women" 259). Over twenty years later, my project has similar aspirations.

1. Transnational *Tessera*

In an article published in *Studies in Canadian Literature* in 1988, Marguerite Andersen notes that English-Canadian and Québécois feminist writers have been "in very active communication" for the last few years (127). Citing as examples the conferences and publications listed above, as well as the work of feminist translators and a number of National Film Board productions, Andersen summarizes this flurry of bilingual artistic collaboration in the following remarkable statement: "Thus the feminist network is breaking down linguistic boundaries within Canada, as it is breaking down racial and political borders on a world-wide level" (128). The first thing to note about this statement is its absolutely triumphant optimism regarding both the collaborations between English and French-speaking feminist writers and the work of international feminism. Transnational feminism, along with the related fields of women of colour feminism and postcolonial feminism among others, has emerged out of the realization that world-wide feminist networks have often *failed* to "break down" (the violence of the repeated phrasal verb seems misplaced) racial and other borders. The "breaking down" of linguistic borders in Canadian feminist circles in the 1980s, while admirable, was not always entirely successful, even in the estimation of those attempting it (a point to which I return below). Yet although Andersen may be naively exultant in her assessment, she does draw a useful parallel between the borders crossed within Canadian feminism and the borders that feminism encounters on a global scale. In that sense, her comment provides a precedent for my perspective here: that the women of *Tessera* are partaking in the same transnational feminism that involves collaboration across physical nation-state borders. To return to Kamboureli's terms for the "trans," they are enacting a *transnational* feminism when they

imagine collaboration *across* Canada and *across* cultural and linguistic (we might even say national) differences, *on the other side* of nationalistic thematic criticism, and *through* the national, as they activate other grounds for mutual recognition without moving *beyond* that which still necessitates critique.

Tessera is a project that worked across cultural and linguistic differences; or more accurately, it was a project that worked *with* or *on* cultural and linguistic differences as these were often the subjects of analysis and constitutive of the vision behind the journal. From the beginning, members of the *Tessera* collective saw themselves as collaborating in light of the differences between feminist writing in English-speaking Canada and in Quebec. In fact, a recognition of those differences was the catalyst for the project and an on-going subject of discussion. At the *Dialogue* conference Marlatt and Mezei were struck by the disparities they perceived between feminist writing in these two contexts and they imagined that a journal like *Tessera* might encourage greater awareness of Québécois feminist writing (Godard et al. "SP/ELLE" 4). In their first "Editorial Statement," the collective characterises "English-Canadian feminist literary criticism" as "largely conventional and uninspired" and they hope that the influence of "the theoretical and experimental writing of Québécois feminists" will inspire their English-speaking counterparts to "become more innovative in [their] theory and practice" (2). There was a dichotomy set up between women's writing and feminism in English Canada versus women's writing and feminism in French-speaking Quebec. For instance, in their contextualization of *Tessera* in 1988, David Homel and Sherry Simon speak of the "pragmatic and experience-oriented" English-Canadian women's movement benefitting from "its encounter with the more theoretical French-language writers" (43). While the

francophone texts were seen as "difficult, often full of wordplay and cultural references," the anglophone writers were characterised as "still largely attracted to the realistic mode, particularly in fictional narrative" (Homel and Simon 43; Mezei 48). This parallels the dichotomy often perceived between Anglo-American feminists and French feminists. In terms of feminist criticism, Rey Chow describes it this way:

> Whereas, for Anglo-American feminists critics, the individual woman, woman author, or woman critic continues to be understood in terms of agency derived from the philosophical foundation of individualism, of the gendered person as an ultimate reality, the pivot of French poststructuralism has been precisely to put such foundationalist thinking into question through theories of language, text, signficiation, and subject, so that what is hitherto considered as an irrefutable certainty, including the individual self, now becomes known more often as a referent, a point in signification that is always *en procès* – that is, constantly disrupted, deferred, dislocated, postponed, if not altogether dissolved. (154)

Whether or not Chow's characterization of Anglo-American feminists versus French poststructuralism can be equated to *Tessera*'s distinction between francophone and anglophone feminist expression in Canada is a question that merits extended study. I suggest one way of approaching this question at the end of my discussion of *Tessera*, below. At this point in my argument, the actual extent of these differences is not as important as the fact that the collective saw itself in terms of perceived differences and considered its work to be "cross-cultural," even (I would argue) transnational (Godard "Women" 262; Mezei 48).

Peter Dickinson's work on translation and sexuality provides a precedent for speaking of English/French Canadian collaboration as "transnational." His 1999 book *Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Literatures of Canada* includes a chapter entitled "Towards a Transnational, Translational Feminist Poetics: Lesbian Fiction/Theory

in Canada and Quebec." Although the term transnational, evoked in his title, is largely absent from the content of his chapter, Dickinson reads literary collaboration between Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt as a challenge to national borders, stating that their poetics encourage readers to expand their "imaginative horizons to accommodate communities other than the ubiquitous nation-state" (154). The "national" borders that Brossard and Marlatt cross are those between French-speaking Quebec and English-Canada so that in Dickinson's analysis, the transnational is very literally already within Canada and indeed is inherent to its national construction upon colonization.[11] A project such as *Tessera* might also be considered transnational because it demonstrates the ways in which theory that originated in multiple other national contexts reverberates differently in different local settings. From its very first editorial statements, the *Tessera* collective quotes *New French Feminisms* (Godard et al. "Editorial" 3), explains its name via Jacques Lacan (Godard et al. "SP/ELLE" 7) and evaluates how American literary theory has crossed the border into Canada (Godard et al. "SP/ELLE" 9). Both Godard and Carrière trace the influences of French and American literary theory on Canadian feminists in Quebec and elsewhere (Carrière 21-28; Godard "Mapmaking" 16, 17). The differences that exist between writing in the feminine and écriture au féminin demonstrate the varying receptions of feminist linguistic and poststructuralist theory. Seen in this light, *Tessera* is a transnational project for some of the same reasons that Kit Dobson's recent study is transnational: not because they deal with texts from other countries, but because they read

[11] The wide debate on the nature of Quebec's "nation" status obviously forms the backdrop for the way that Dickinson and I use the term "transnational" to discuss collaborations between Québécoise and English-Canadian writers. (And these terms are problematic too, as a writer could consider herself both Québécoise and English-Canadian.) This concept of the transnationality of Canada's French and English founding is not always addressed in Canadian literary transnational studies (Dobson's sub-title *Anglo-Canadian Literature and Globalization* springs to mind) although notably, more than a third of the essays in *Canada and Its Americas* do deal primarily with Quebec.

internationally-acclaimed theory through Canadian literature and attend to what is already transnational within the Canadian nation-state (Dobson xiv, xvii).

It is clear in the early editions of *Tessera* that exploring the differences between writing in the feminine in English and in French is a primary focus of the collective and the journal. For instance, writing on behalf of the editing collective, Gail Scott hopes that the theme of the second issue ("L'écriture comme lecture") will "faire ressortir à la fois les points communs et les dissemblances entre l'écriture au féminin au Québec et au Canada" ("Liminaire" 5). Introducing the third issue, the collective again affirms this theme: "as the more critical and theoretical articles suggest, Québec and English-Canadian women are not Siamese twins: the common ground of these pages masks divergence" (Godard "Fiction" 5). This concern with differences between feminist expressions resonates with the underlying anti-essentialism of transnational feminism. They are not trying to dissolve difference like proponents of a "global sisterhood" type of feminism, nor are they reifying difference through the construction of a monolithic other, a problematic tendency that Mohanty denounces in her well-know essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses."[12] Rather they turn the spotlight onto the cultural, linguistic and national differences between them in order to differentiate feminist expressions.

I am arguing that this is an important move and that it partakes of transnational feminism, but the transnational feminist perspective also urges me to critique their evocation of difference. For instance, in their first editorial statement, they present *Tessera* as serving "above all" as "a forum for dialogue between French and English women writers and among women across Canada interested in feminist literary criticism" (Godard et al.

[12] See my second chapter for more information on Mohanty's contributions to transnational feminist theory and on the "global sisterhood" feminism against which transnational feminism defines itself.

"Editorial" 2). This sounds well-intentioned and mutually-beneficial, but it is prefaced by a more problematic statement (from which I quoted above):

> TESSERA was begun in order to bring the theoretical and experimental writing of Québécois feminists to the attention of English-Canadian writers, to acquaint Quebec writers with English-Canadian feminist writing, and to encourage English-Canadian feminist literary criticism, which we feel has been largely conventional and uninspired, to become more innovative in its theory and practice. (2)

A cynical reading of this statement would argue that English-Canadian writers are calling on the Québécois feminists to act as native informants for the benefit of English-Canadian literature because they see the Québécois feminists as being further along on a progressivist timeline of newer, better feminist expression.[13] The risks are that the collaboration be unfairly lop-sided and susceptible to appropriation. Gail Scott recognizes these risks early on in the editorial conversations: she warns that "Anglophones writing for TESSERA, writing and developing feminist theory, will have to be very conscious that we have to find our own way. I don't think we should leave the impression that what we want to do is transpose what's happening in French into English" (15). The original statement quoted above, which was the first sentence of the first editorial statement from *Tessera*, loses prominence in the second issue. It is relegated to the back of the issue and presented in a

[13] Elsewhere, Marlatt imagines English-Canadian feminist writers "reaching forward to their new writing in French with its well-developed analysis, its radical deconstruction of male-biased language, its creative invention of new words and new ways of speaking" ("In the Feminine" 13). Kathy Mezei remembers conceiving of *Tessera* as "a journal that would introduce Quebec feminist writing to English-Canadians who were still largely attracted to the realistic mode" (48). Such statements suggest that the benefits of the collaboration are more unidirectional than mutual.

slightly modified French version (n.p.)[14] while another moment of self-definition is highlighted at the beginning of the issue (6).[15]

I certainly do not wish to overstate this point or to ascribe ill-intent to the English-Canadian feminists excited about developments in Quebec. But a transnational feminist perspective must be vigilant toward articulations of difference, having assimilated critiques levied against ethnocentric Western feminism. In an article on scholarly immigrant women as native informants in the Western academy, Sherene Razack writes of the problematic "scripts of cultural difference" that Western women scholars sometimes use when writing about non-Western women (42-43). Razack gives the example of the Western natural childbirth movement's reverence toward non-Western women who give birth in a squatting position. She concludes that "

> Apart from erasing from view any women of non-Western origin *in* the West, this representation keeps the binary Native/non-Native firmly in place and it reserves for Western white women the role of being the only ones to truly appreciate what the natives have to offer – birth in a squatting position." (43)

Why does this critique make me think of *Tessera* when it seems so far removed from anything involving Canadian literature? In response to the editorial statement critiqued above, could we not rewrite Razack's critique to say, "Apart from erasing from view *any*

[14] The French version divides the sentence into two so that the first sentence gives a greater impression of equal exchange and the second declares that *Tessera* itself wants to inspire innovation. "TESSERA veut porter à l'attention des écrivaines canadiennes-anglaises les oeuvres théoriques et expérimentales des féministes québécoises et presenter à ces dernières les travaux des féministes du Canada anglais. Tessera veut aussi inciter la critique littéraire féministe canadienne, qui est généralement conventionnelle, sans « inspiration », a devenir plus innovatrice dans sa pratique comme dans sa théorie" (n.p.).

[15] This one reads: "*Tessera* se veut un lieu où les écrivaines féministes du Québec et du Canada qui s'intéressent à la modernité peuvent se rencontrer à travers leurs textes, leurs réflexions théoriques" ("TESSERA?" 6). By its third and fourth issue, *Tessera*'s taglines have been refined: it is "a forum for dialogue between French and English women writers across Canada interested in feminist literary criticism" (n.p. at back of volumes 3 and 4) but the original statement quoted above makes its reappearance at the back of future issues (see, for example, volume five).

women in Canada who are not English or French speaking OR any Québécois feminists indifferent to écriture au féminin, this representation keeps the binary *French/English* firmly in place and it reserves for the select group of *English-speaking feminists writing in the feminine* the role of being the only ones to truly appreciate what the *innovative Québécois feminists* have to offer – *a better way to write as women*"? Like the natural childbirth-ers who ultimately hope to adopt the squatting position and thereby erase the differences between themselves and their non-Western models, the rhetoric of *Tessera* runs the risk of glossing over the very differences they initially found inspiring by equating writing in the feminine and écriture au féminin. Gail Scott makes this clear in the third volume in an editorial presented as an exchange of letters among the collective. Scott writes,

> Already in the last issue I wanted to say something in the liminaire about the differences existing in Québec and Canada among women writers on the subject of writing in the feminine. This time I think the texts themselves are going to force us to be more clear (I almost said 'honest' – because I feel we've been sloughing over this somewhat." (Godard et al. "Fiction/Theory" 8)

As much as difference is a crucial category for transnational feminism, its articulations cannot be taken for granted but must be vigilantly analysed for inevitable elisions, assumptions and manifestations of subtle power dynamics.

2. Self-criticism in/and/of Collaboration

Moving beyond this potential critique, it is crucial to note the self-reflexivity at work in these editorials. That is, these moments of self-definition and subsequent questioning (like Scott's, quote directly above) occur within the public space of the *Tessera*

project and in the context of collaborative reflection. These two elements – self-reflexivity and collaboration – are important components of transnational feminist methodology. The definition of transnational feminism proposed by Richa Nagar and Amanda Lock Starr in their 2010 publication *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* includes a clause in which they recommend that transnational feminisms "interweave critiques, actions, and self-reflexivity so as to resist a priori predictions of what might constitute feminist politics in a given place and time" (5). They go on to assert that the productivity of transnational feminist studies depends upon constant self-questioning and redefinition: "our claim is that transnational feminist studies is a necessarily unstable field that must contest its very definition in order to be useful" (12). In the same volume, Jigna Desai, Danielle Bouchard, and Diane Detournay also recommend that transnational feminism perform vigilant self-critique (60). This is deemed necessary because transnational feminism draws on and incorporates a wide variety of movements and approaches that overlap, but that can have different emphases (Desai et al. name postcolonial feminism, Third World feminism, and women of colour feminism as examples) (60). Self-critique is also necessary because of the slipperiness of the transnational itself, so often evoked to gloss over a certain relativism (Nagar and Swarr 12). Nagar and Swarr, along with Desai, Bouchard and Detournay, imply that transnational feminism must be self-critical because it is a term or movement with such wide reach, both theoretically (as it draws on postcolonialism, globalization studies, and numerous anti-essentialist feminisms) and geographically (because it can involve women living in very different material circumstances and geo-political spaces). In their introduction to *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (a seminal book for the conceptualization of transnational feminism), Grewal and

Kaplan evoke the "spirit of feminist self-examination" and urge feminists to continually question their own narratives and to "be open to rethinking and self-reflexivity as an ongoing process" ("Introduction" 18). I would argue that transnational feminism emphasizes self-examination and self-critique because it has always situated itself against a type of international feminism that it sees as precisely *un*-self-critical and blind to its own assumptions and homogenizations.

In an editorial conversation published in the fifth issue of *Tessera*, Marlatt asks, "have we seen women's writing in Québec and Canada create the kind of space in which women readers can feel at home? Are we talking back and forth to each other…? Or is this a closed conversation, limited to only a few women?" (Godard et al. "In Conversation" 7). Although this query evokes the entirety of women's writing in Quebec and Canada, it is clearly a self-reflexive question that the *Tessera* collective is asking itself.[16] Their larger commitment to self-reflexivity is exemplified by their interest in the writer as reader and vice versa (the theme for volume two is: "Reading as Writing / Writing as Reading") and by their rereading practices. As early as their third issue, they publish texts that are critical rewritings of texts published in the first volumes of *Tessera* and they explicitly call for more such "re-visionary texts" (Godard et al. "Fiction/Theory 4-5). This trend continues even in Godard's retrospective essay on *Tessera*, as it is entitled "Women of Letters (Reprise)," complete with the fitting touch of the bilingual resonances of "reprise." Appropriately, these explicit moments of self-reflexivity often occur in the collectively-authored editorials. The collective experimented with different ways of presenting their

[16] There are other examples of self-reflexivity. In the third volume Marlatt evokes "the big question about how to speak, editorially, of the difference between Quebec & English-Canada in contemporary feminist writing" (Godard et al. "Theorizing" 10). Her asking of this question is part of its answer, as she is already speaking of that difference in a collectively-authored editorial.

collaborative voice in the pages of the journal.[17] "SP/ELLE: Spelling Out the Reasons," which acts as an explanation of *Tessera* in its first volume, is an edited transcription of a conversation they had approximately six months earlier (Godard et al. "SP/ELLE" 4). It is literally written out as a script, making their individual voices perfectly distinguishable even as readers see how they respond to one another in conversation. Editorial statements are sometimes signed by all four members of the collective (Godard et al. "Editorial" 3) or sometimes signed by one member "on behalf of the collective," presumably because that individual did the actual writing to which the others granted their approval (Godard "Fiction/Theory" 5, Scott "Liminaire" 6). Their text "Theorizing Fiction Theory" compiles a dialogue of excerpts from letters exchanged between them over a three-month period and the excerpts are interspersed with each of their definitions of "Fiction theory," in bold font and divided from the rest of the text by double lines (Godard et al. "Theorizing" 6-12). Again, another text provides a fitting example of the way in which their methodology links self-reflexivity and collaboration: in a piece called "In Conversation" the members of the editorial collective present their reflections *on* conversation, *in* conversation (Godard et al. "In" 7-12).

Their commitment to working collaboratively is evident from the inception of the project, as demonstrated by these editorial pieces. Indeed, it is built into the structure of the journal's internal processes: from the first issue they inform potential contributors to expect long delays for notification of acceptance or rejection as submissions are "read and discussed long-distance by all members of the collective" (Godard et al. "Editorial" 2). In

[17] Godard comments on this in the eleventh volume: "The differing format of our editorials is the trace of the narrative of our collective engagement with the issues and debates presented in *Tessera*. It is also the trace of our individual engagements, silence indicating sometimes absence of an articulated position on a question, at others, lack of time to write a fully elaborated text on that position" (Godard "Liminaire" 8).

the "In Conversation" piece, they explore the idea that their collaborative (conversational) methodology is especially fitting for considering feminist ideas.[18] At the risk of generalizing, they identify collaborative conversation as a form of communication privileged by women (7, 11) and see it as a mode that, ideally, encourages mutuality, exploration, collectivity, participation, empowerment and even transgression and transformation (7-12). Looking back on *Tessera*, both Godard and Marlatt remember the project in terms of collectivity, community, collaboration and conversation. Godard begins her "Reprise" with: "Creating a community of women of letters" (258) and goes on to assert that "The constitution of a community of women writing and reading, engaged in an exchange of letters, is a crucial feature of identity formation: theory and form of self-identification, it figures as necessary fiction of collective activity and its legitimizing tool" (269). Marlatt remembers a scene of collaborative conversation among the *Tessera* collective:

> there we were, curled or slouched in separate chairs with our individual coffees, our individual positions in the conversations – ideas twining together in the space between us, or brought up short with an asserted difference, but then finding another way to grow, elaborate from the difference itself. (*Reading* 25)

The mention of "asserted difference" is important. The fact that *Tessera* published their conversations and interactions means that they valued the frictions of collaborative work as the publishable text, which, once published, was rendered open to further revision and comment in the larger conversations of Canadian feminist criticism. One need only read through "Theorizing Fiction Theory" (the piece with the excerpts from correspondence mixed with definitions) to note the way that they showcase their divergent understandings

[18] In my fourth chapter, I explore the resonances of using "conversation" as a metaphor for women's collaboration.

of the same phenomenon. Indeed, Godard remembers how "Every time we had to make decisions about texts or titles, we realized that each of us understood *Tessera*'s project in very different ways" ("Women" 284).

What surfaces in these moments of collective editorial self-definition is a commitment to collaboration that is self-reflexive and that does not hide its internal disagreements. That is, the collective addresses its own differences, even as its main area of literary interest *is* difference itself – the difference of feminist criticism from other kinds of literary analysis, and the difference between English-Canadian and Québécois feminist work. I would suggest that this matrix of collaboration, difference and feminism is essential to the kind of transnational feminist theory that I link to *Tessera* and that I discuss throughout this dissertation. Grewal and Kaplan foreground the importance of collaborative work from the first pages of *Scattered Hegemonies* (1-2) and it is also crucial in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (ix). Nagar and Swarr identify these books as "the two texts that are often viewed as canonical in defining and conceptualizing transnational feminisms" (9). In fact, Nagar and Swarr are most interested in the different ways that these two texts define transnational feminist collaboration (9-12) and collaboration is a vital keyword in their own collection, *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (14). Indeed, collaboration is evoked in each of the three questions that launched Nagar and Swarr's book project, and in each of the three objectives that ultimately defined it (14).[19] *Tessera* was born out of a moment in Canadian literary history remembered as

[19] (Note the recurrence of references to collaboration.) They initiated the book's project with these three questions: "What forms can transnational feminist **collaboration** take and what limits do such forms pose? What are the relationships among **collaboration** and transnational feminist theorists in creating new spaces for political and intellectual engagements across North/South and East/West divides? Can **collaborative** practices consciously combine struggles for intellectual empowerment and socioeconomic justice while also attending to the problem of how northern academic engagements inevitably produce 'difference'?"

particularly collaborative – when writing in the feminine met écriture au féminin (Carrière 4, 11) – and it explored collaborative practice in its editorials and published texts that theorized feminist collaboration (Godard "Women" 286; Martindale 54-63). The centrality of collaborative theory and practice for both *Tessera* and transnational feminist studies generally is an important rationale for inscribing *Tessera* on a genealogy of transnational feminist thought in Canadian women's writing.

3. Who Are "We"?

Not only does self-reflexivity happen in the context of collaboration, but the workings of the collaboration itself become subject to self-scrutiny. This is the point at which it is necessary to examine the short-comings and failures of *Tessera*'s collaborative project, according to transnational feminism's mandate to self-critical reflection. As Nagar and Swarr assert, collaboration must not be viewed as a panacea but must itself be "subjected to continuous critical scrutiny" (14). In terms of its commitment to bilingualism and to "dialogue between French and English women writers" (Godard et al. "Editorial" 2) *Tessera* fell short at its inception, as evidenced in Gail Scott's comment in "SP/ELLE:"

> we haven't completely succeeded because we haven't got a francophone on the editorial board. And we're not translating towards the French in this [first] issue. Once more – although it wasn't our intention – the burden is on francophone women to make the language concession. (8)

The three goals of their book are: 1. "to conceptualize feminist **collaboration** as an intellectual political practice that allows us to grapple with the possibilities and limitations of theory as praxis and insists upon problematizing the rigid compartmentalization that separates research from pedagogy, academic from activist labour, and theorizing from organizing and performance arts." 2. "to combine theories and practices of knowledge production through **collaborative** dialogues that invite us to rethink dominant scholarly approaches to subalternity, voice, authorship, and representation." 3. "to explore how feminist approaches to **collaboration** can allow us to articulate transnational feminist frameworks and to simultaneously create new spaces for political and intellectual initiatives across socioeconomic, geographical, and institutional borders" (14-15 emphasis mine)

Although a francophone woman, Louise Cotnoir, did eventually join the editorial collective (Godard "Thresholds" 9) and *Tessera* has consistently published texts in both English and French, the question of genuine bilingualism and inclusivity has not been shirked. Godard remembers how crucial it was for the collective to choose a name (*Tessera*) that looks and sounds (almost) identical in both English and French,[20] a decision that she describes as "resistance to the domination of English" ("Women" 278). Indeed, Godard figures *Tessera* as anti-imperial in its "cross-cultural work against the imperialism of English" but also wonders whether "*Tessera*'s policy of bilingualism gestures (vainly?) toward undoing the power relations" of the "colonizer/colonized status of English/French relations within the Canadian feminist community" ("Women" 262, 287). The tension around this issue is evident. For as much as Godard recognizes that "unilingualism in the language of the colonizer is the condition of the powerful" ("Women" 287) she cannot deny that the collection she is writing for (the collected *Tessera* texts in *Collaboration in the Feminine*) is "a unilingual English text, a major swerve from *Tessera*'s practice of foregrounding the work of translation as the (re)reading of one language through another by placing French and English on facing pages, or by framing a text in one language with a précis in another" ("Women" 283). When Scott laments the lack of a francophone editor in the first issue of *Tessera*, Kathy Mezei retorts that the main intent of *Tessera* is primarily unidirectional – to expose English-speaking writers to Québécois French feminist theory (Godard et al. "SP/ELLE" 8). Although this assertion is contested at times, the editorial decision to pursue a unilingual *Collaboration in the Feminine* speaks volumes (although the publisher

[20] Part of the conversation recorded in "SP/ELLE" involves the collective discussing the origins of the name *Tessera*. They remember choosing it because for them it evoked: the patchwork quilt as an image of women's work, the notion of fragmentation, the pieces of a mosaic, a possible reference to spinning, the concept of the lapsus, and the way "Lacan used it in talking about the relationship between speech and language in psychoanalysis" (6-7).

presumably had a say in the matter as well, guided by marketing and sales potentials for such a collection).

In "Women of Letters (Reprise)," Godard is much more overtly critical of *Tessera*'s treatment of racialized women than she is in regards to its faltering bilingualism. She writes that the collective's "inability to hear Quebec's difference was slight in comparison to our inability as whites to hear the differences of women of colour" (263). She makes reference to a moment in the "SP/ELLE" editorial when they referred "briefly, and condescendingly" to Native and Black women in Canada (263). The reference is most likely to the moment when Godard implies that these women have not yet arrived at the supposedly sophisticated feminist perspective of the writing in the feminine / écriture au féminin writers ("We are talking about stages of development and the fact that the native women and the black women are going through this process of naming themselves and self-discovery. They're not ready to face the question of language") ("SP/ELLE" 10). The work of Caribbean-Canadian writer Marlene Nourbese Philip, who published in *Tessera* in a 1989 issue, springs readily to mind in contradiction of this patronizing assumption. *Tessera* did eventually publish texts dealing explicitly with white privilege, racialized women's bodies and colonization, particularly in their twelfth volume which was devoted to "Other Looks: Race, Representation and Gender" – although notably an innovative text by Jam Ismail was published in 1988 that dealt with race, immigration and language (Godard "Women" 294, 298, 301, 302). Although Godard regrets that *Tessera* was not particularly aware of women from other cultures writing in Canada, some of her own early editorial work shows that there was a certain cognizance of the way that women of colour feminisms were challenging ethnocentric white feminism at the time. She clearly addresses this in *Tessera*'s

fourth volume on the theme of "The State of Feminist Criticism." She refers to the interventions of women of colour who challenge white feminists to examine their own complicity in racial oppression and to consider class and race in their analyses of sexism (Godard "Editorial: Feminist" 11-13). She writes of the need for feminist theory to move beyond the binary logic of sexual difference and to consider how difference operates between women; feminism itself must be critiqued and difference, she asserts, is the primary feminist question of the 1980s (Godard "Editorial: Feminist" 11-13). Because she diagnoses her own ethnocentrism and then goes on to become an advocate of anti-essentialist feminism, Godard's work reminds us not to presumptuously label some feminists as "second-wave" (implying ethnocentric) and some as "third-wave" (implying race-conscious) when some voices speak from both "waves."

These assessments are extremely pertinent to a potential genealogy of transnational feminist thought in Canadian women's writing. Writing in 1988, Godard argues that the primary questions of feminist inquiry in the 1980s relate to "differences within feminism… the gaps and silences of the feminist project" (Godard "Editorial: Feminist" 11). Indeed, she writes that difference and the interweaving of considerations of race and class into theorizations of gender are the main subjects of feminist inquiry at the time. She makes these comments six years prior to the publication of *Scattered Hegemonies* and a decade before *Feminist Genealogies*, the two canonical texts of transnational feminism. She writes in 1988, the same year as the publication of Elizabeth Spelman's groundbreaking *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* and a decade before Nancy Hartsock proclaims that feminists are "only beginning to explore the possibilities of working together across differences" (69). Godard's comments are timely if not prescient,

and they are an example of perhaps the most obvious argument for reading *Tessera* in terms of transnational feminism: that *Tessera* engaged with the debates of the time regarding feminism and difference and these are the debates at the core of transnational feminist theory. The questions posed by a 1990 *Tessera* editorial are the central questions of anti-essentialist and transnational feminisms:

> Who is we?…Who is 'we' speaking for? What are the implications for a theory of the gendered subject if one considers the additional complexities of subject-positions offered on different racial and class grounds? How can we talk about the subject in the feminine within this unstable field of identities? (Godard et al. "Subject" 9)[21]

Indeed, Godard takes up the issue of the speaking "we" in the following volume of *Tessera* as well, a volume devoted to "Essentialism(e)" ("Essentialism" 37). Her survey of the ways that essentialism has (and has not) been addressed in Canadian feminist discourse is both an important precedent for my own research as well as an example of the kinds of moments that ought to figure on the imagined genealogy of transnational feminist thought in Canadian women's writing.

Essentialism is also a stance that the *Tessera* collective encountered when some of their own creative work was labelled essentialist and when they received submissions that proposed essentialist understandings of the relationship between women's bodies and women's texts (Godard et al. "Theorizing" 7; Godard "Essentialism?" 34-36). Discussing this tendency in an editorial conversation, Godard notes that "the slippage towards the unmediated body brings with it the danger of nominalism, of an essential feminism that would embrace a direct relationship between word and thing and so ignore the lesson of modernism about the impossibility of language ever representing reality" (Godard et al.

[21] Here my referencing of "Godard et al." is complicated by changes within the editorial collective. At this point, Louise Cotnoir was also part of the collective. See my bibliography for details.

"Theorizing" 8). It is important to note that the essentialism that Godard addresses here is different from the ethnocentric essentialism I discuss above. In the preceding paragraph, I refer to the anti-essentialist work of feminists challenging racism and ethnocentricity within the mainstream North American feminist movement. Here, however, I refer to the ways in which the *Tessera* collective grapples with the kind of essentialism that assumes that women's bodies *are* a certain way (the "unmediated body"). The "who is we?" question quoted above has to do with the transition from a "global sisterhood" mentality to a "transnational feminist" approach, informed by the women of colour and postcolonial feminists who urge other feminists to realize their own complicity in racism and other oppressions and to think about sex and gender as they intersect with other identity categories. This can be seen, for instance, in the work of Mohanty, who denounces the "assumption that all women, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group. […] This is an assumption that characterizes much feminist discourse" (*Feminism* 22). This critique is different from that which questions the very idea of "woman," a category seen as fundamentally constructed.

Therefore, the essentialism denounced by Mohanty is of a different order than the essentialism of what Godard calls the "slippage towards the unmediated body" (Godard et al. "Theorizing" 8). *Tessera* is wary of this type of essentialist understanding of "woman" because of its indebtedness (via writing in the feminine and écriture au féminin's interest in language and subjectivity) to poststructuralism and so-called French theory, although "the French feminists" have been accused of essentialism as well (Banting "The Body" 223; Carrière 21, 25; Godard "Mapmaking" 16-20). So one critique of feminism is that it uses the term "women" with false pretensions of inclusivity: "Within women's groups, what it is

to be a woman too often means to be a white, upper-middle class, heterosexual, sighted, and hearing, Christian, Euro-American woman" (Miller 177). The other critique is against assumptions about the very idea of womanhood, which must be subject to deconstructive and poststructural critique that reveals the discursive constructedness of sex and gender categories: "The very act of defining a gender identity excludes or devalues some bodies, practices, and discourses at the same time that it obscures the constructed, and thus contestable, character of that gender identity" (Young "Gender as" 190). Both of these conversations are questioning the "we" of feminism, but from different angles. In thinking through feminist theory from the late twentieth-century, these two angles can be read in cooperation with one another, as in the following summation from Iris Marion Young:

> Doubts about the possibility of saying that women can be thought of as one social collective arose from challenges to a generalized conception of gender and women's oppression by women of color, in both the Northern and Southern hemispheres, and by lesbians… The influence of philosophical deconstruction completed the suspension of the category of 'women' begun by this process of political differentiation. Exciting theorizing has shown (not for the first time) the logical problems in efforts to define clear, essential categories of being. ("Gender as" 188; see also Khanna 223)

Young goes on to review these positions with reference to Elizabeth Spelman, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Judith Butler. These names would not necessarily appear on the same page in many other texts on feminism and (anti)essentialism. For instance, in her overview of contemporary feminism, Susan Gubar organizes her summation of these questions according to a much sharper distinction between post-structuralist feminist critique and anti-racist and postcolonial feminist critique (118).[22] But thinking about the relationship between the two constitutes one of the most important conversations of contemporary

[22] Rey Chow analyzes the wariness and even hostility that Gubar exhibits towards both of these feminist stances (181). Chow sees this as an example of how "white feminism" has been "reluctant to dislodge white women from their preferred status as the representatives of alterity throughout Western history" (179).

feminism, articulated by Butler and Joan W. Scott as "What are the points of convergence between a) poststructuralist criticisms of identity and b) recent theory by women of color that critically exposes the unified or coherent subject as a prerogative of white theory?" (xiv-xv). This is a catalyzing question for their important 1992 collection *Feminists Theorize the Political*, in which well-known feminist scholars reflect on "the political status of poststructuralist theory within feminism."[23] Indeed, as Rey Chow states, the debate over the usefulness of poststructuralism has been a "point of tension" between feminists "since the introduction of poststructuralist theory into the English-speaking academic world" (154).

To return to my reading of *Tessera*: my point here is that a project like *Tessera*, which incorporates both a nascent critique of ethnocentric feminism and an important interest in poststructuralist poetics and feminist deconstruction, can help us to think through the relationships between feminist anti-essentialism and feminist poststructuralism manifest in Canadian women's writing. It is clear from the so-called canonical texts of transnational feminism that it has always been in conversation with contemporary theory: *Scattered Hegemonies* is, after all, sub-titled "Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practice" (see also Alexander and Mohanty "Introduction" xv, xvii). What is less than clear, however, is the nature of that conversation. Alena Heitlinger, for example, defines transnational feminism as "building on insights of postmodernism and postcoloniality" (7) but others see the influence of postmodernism as dangerous: "Postmodernist discourse attempts to move beyond essentialism by pluralizing and dissolving the stability and analytic utility of the categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality. This strategy often

[23] This description comes from the back cover of the book itself.

forecloses any valid recuperation of these categories" (Alexander and Mohanty "Introduction" xvii). *Feminist Theorize the Political* addresses this same anxiety, described as "the belief that without an ontologically grounded feminist subject there can be no politics" (Butler and Scott "Introduction" xiv) and the "criticism of poststructuralist thinking is that women are 'just now' beginning to become subjects in their own right and that poststructuralism deprives women of the right to be included in a humanist universality" (Butler and Scott "Introduction" xvi). *Tessera* might help us to conceptualize the entanglements of feminist thought with postmodernity, anti-essentialism and transnationalism as they relate, in the context of Canadian women's writing, to the writing in the feminine / écriture au féminin movements and to *Tessera*'s collaborative transnational project. Some of the questions animating this interrogation would be: how is the supposed opposition between postmodernism and transnational feminism (posited by Alexander and Mohanty in the above quote) parallel to the debate aired in the fourth issue of *Tessera*, in which the editors of *Contemporary Verse II* (the journal hosting the issue) express their discomfort with what they see as the French-influenced poststructuralist theory of *Tessera* (Casey 6-8)? What does it mean when the editing collective characterizes feminist literature in Quebec as both heavily influenced by "continental philosophy, semiotics and contemporary linguistics" as well as staunchly feminist and anti-colonial (Godard et al. "SP/ELLE" 11)? How is this complicated by *Tessera*'s own claims to anti-imperialism (Godard "Women" 262, 278)? How does *Tessera* both reinforce and denounce the "outdated notion that anglophone feminism necessarily gives primacy to social action and American-influenced empirical thought, as opposed to Québécois feminism's bent towards Continental philosophy" (Carrière 12) and is that linguistic-theoretical binary

equivalent to the binary of postmodernism and transnational feminist activism? An interesting place to start would be Godard's claim that "Despite what might seem an exclusive concern with strategies of writing otherwise, signalled in the titles of issues, so called 'activist' agendas have been interwoven in each issue of *Tessera*" ("Women" 300). I initiate this line of questioning here at the close of my discussion of *Tessera* in order to suggest that not only do we make use of transnational feminism to enhance our readings of literary moments such as *Tessera*, but that they themselves can help us to bring new complexities to the history and theory of feminist studies.[24]

The Interventions of Transnational Feminism and Literary Critical Practice

Reading through the theory that defines transnational feminism, one encounters concepts and emphases that seem to have nothing to do with something like *Tessera*. The category of the global is inherently crucial to transnational feminism. Transnational feminist scholarship often discusses: transnational flows – especially capitalist – and their effects on women, Third World women and the way they are constructed in Western discourse, and links (oppressive and productive) between women and feminists in the North

[24] In this section, I have referred to postmodernism and poststructuralism in a way that might appear to conflate the two. Indeed, those who argue that postmodernism and/or poststructuralism are detrimental to feminist activist often *do* conflate the two. Chantal Mouffe notes this tendency: "if the term 'postmodern' indicates such a critique of Enlightenment's universalism and rationalism, it must be acknowledged that it refers to the main currents of twentieth-century philosophy and there is no reason to single our poststructuralism as a special target. On the other side, if by "postmodernism" one wants to designate only the very specific form that such a critique takes in authors such as Lyotard and Baudrillard, there is absolutely no justification for putting in that category people like Derrida, Lacan, or Foucault, as has generally been the case" (370). A thorough pursuit of the link between *Tessera* and this feminist debate would necessitate the kind of specificity called for by Mouffe.

and South, or Western and non-Western.[25] Nagar and Swarr, for instance, propose that transnational feminism is defined in part by its attention to "racialized, classed, masculinised, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies" (5). Even in the context of Canadian literary criticism, the few instances of engagement with the transnational have a keen eye on globalization and the category of the global. Kit Dobson understands the transnational perspective as that which "highlights the ways in which national entities are criss-crossed by the global order" (xii). As I suggest at the outset of this chapter, there seems to be a general consensus that the transnational has something to do with actual (or fictional, in the case of literary studies) places, people or phenomena that are complexly connected to other places, people or phenomena in other nations, specifically through the workings of globalization. The kinds of literary analyses underway in Siemerling and Casteel's *Canada and Its Americas* and Dobson's *Transnational Canadas* therefore attend to Canadian literature's extra-national connections. For instance, one contribution to Siemerling and Casteel's collection reads Dionne Brand's *No Language is Neutral* and *A Map to the Door of No Return* in terms of Spivak's notion of worlding, emphasizing Brand's engagement with the Americas (Leahy 69-76). Dobson also reads Dionne Brand, arguing that her novel *What We All Long For* can be interpreted in light of Deleuzian deterritorialization as Brand depicts a global, transnational city (180-181). The emphasis is on the unsettling of literal nation-state borders and the scene is international.

[25] For examples of these themes see: Grewal and Kaplan "Introduction" 17, 20; Hawkesworth "When the Subaltern" 17; Mohanty 17-42, 246-249; Razack "Your Place" 40, 50.

My transnational feminist reading of *Tessera* makes little or no mention of globalization or nation-states other than Canada, and insofar as the global is a central category for transnational feminism, this causes me some discomfort here (whereas the global is a more central keyword for some of my other chapters). However, I situate the methodology of my reading in terms of transnational feminism because there are important aspects of transnational feminism that *absolutely* resonate with my project and also because I am convinced that when the transnational feminist perspective is stretched to include research such as mine, it is forced to question, redefine and ultimately strengthen its terms of inquiry in a way that corresponds with its own commitment to self-critique. The first move of my approach has been to discover what constitutes theorizations and conceptualizations of transnational feminism within the North American academy. In typical self-reflexive fashion, one of the objects of study in transnational feminist academic work is… transnational feminist academic work. For instance, Alexander and Mohanty's recent project has been to analyse references to transnational feminism on syllabi for women's and gender studies courses and LGBTT[26]/ queer studies courses ("Cartographies" 31-32). They therefore define their interest as being in "the politics of knowledge and the place of transnational feminisms in the academy" and acknowledge that "the U.S. academy is a very particular location for the production of knowledge" (even as they challenge the academy to be less insular and more self-critical) ("Cartographies" 26, 35). Obviously, my dissertation project also has an academic focus: it is informed by the way that transnational feminism is defined in scholarship and is primarily concerned with literary texts and literary history. I find resonances with Alexander and Mohanty's earlier work as well. In

[26] This abbreviation stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transvestite, Transsexual.

their introduction to *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, one of the three main ideas they want to consider in the volume is described as "the significance of self-examination and reflection on the genealogies of feminist organizations" (xv). They go on to explain that they are interested in the way that feminist communities remember and evaluate their own histories and struggles (xvi). They speak of "genealogies" and "legacies" not to "suggest a frozen or embodied inheritance of domination and resistance, but an interested, conscious thinking and rethinking of history and historicity, a rethinking which has women's autonomy and self-determination at its core" (xvi). My own project shares this commitment to historicization that furthers feminist inquiry. Alexander and Mohanty specify that their interest is in the way that feminist collectives remember their own history; likewise, I am interested in the way that *Tessera* presents its own origins and remembers itself retrospectively. This is representative of my larger interest in the way that the history of Canadian women's writing is characterized and conceptualized in Canadian literary studies. When they indicate that they do not propose any frozen genealogies, Alexander and Mohanty are distancing themselves from a historical approach that seeks to identify what "really" happened as accurately as possible. The goal is not to access historical facts (an impossible task given the mediation and constructedness of history) but to think about *how* we remember, and to perhaps propose a new way of remembering, in order to see how it opens texts up to new questions. This seems an appropriate moment to again recall Godard's invitation to "reframe" the texts of *Tessera* "through the changed angle of hindsight" and the "speculative activity of interpretation" ("Women" 303).

Discovering what constitutes theorizations and conceptualizations of transnational feminism within the North American academy serves not only to help me to situate my own

contribution vis-à-vis the positionings of other scholars but it also alerts me to the key concepts and questions of transnational feminist inquiry which then guide my reading practice. It will be evident from my above analyses of *Tessera* that my readings of the early editorials and later critical work on *Tessera* focus particularly on moments related to: the articulation of difference, collaboration between women, essentialism and anti-essentialism, and collaboration across languages, cultures or nations. Most of the debates and topics of transnational feminist scholarship boil down to these kinds of themes. There are ample precedents for transnational feminist theory that draws on literary sources, or literary texts read through transnational feminist perspectives. For instance, the majority of the contributions to *Scattered Hegemonies* engage in literary analysis, often interrogating how fictional texts portray the relationships between gender and nation (Liu, Layoun, Natarajan). In her 1990 article "Dealing with Difference," Christina Crosby offers her interpretation of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* at the culmination of her argument on difference and feminism (141). Similarly, Iris Marion Young describes a scene from Meredith Tax's novel *Rivington Street* in order to illustrate her ideas on how feminism can imagine women as a collectivity without essentializing or excluding (210). What all of these texts have in common is what I am stating explicitly in regards to my own reading strategy: that a transnational feminist reading strategy means prioritizing aspects of the text that relate to the fundamental questions of transnational feminism. In the context of Canadian literature, precedents for transnational feminist reading would include Lianne Moyes' work on transnational citizenship in the poetry of Erin Mouré, and Julia Emberley's explorations of the tensions between indigenous women's struggles for Native self-determination and the feminist movement in Canadian literary circles.

If the first step towards a transnational feminist reading methodology is to discover what constitutes theorizations and conceptualizations of transnational feminism within the North American academy, and the second step is to identify the key concepts and questions of transnational feminist inquiry which can guide a reading practice, then the third move must involve the influence of the literary texts on the first two steps. How does *Tessera* talk back to the transnational feminist theory that influences my reading of it? One idea that I explore above is that *Tessera* offers an interesting site through which to think about the relationship between anti-essentialist, postcolonial and transnational feminisms and poststructuralist theory on the constructedness of subjectivity. Another idea emerges through my argument that *Tessera* is inherently transnational in its investment in the French/ English difference in Canada. This point begs the question: can the "transnational" of transnational feminism accommodate a feminist project that does not involve the crossing of official nation-state borders, but that sees itself as collaborating across difference? Transnational feminism is fundamentally concerned with the way that the global manifests within the local (Grewal and Kaplan "Introduction" 20); parallel to this, can the transnational manifest within the national, as with *Tessera*? If so, how does that accommodation cause transnational feminism to rethink its own assumptions about the transnational? Yet another idea for reading *Tessera* in conversation with transnational feminist theory centres around the collaborative editorial process involved in producing *Tessera*. Desai, Bouchard and Detournay have recently cautioned against the positing of collaboration as "the teleological methodology of feminism," in which collaboration is seen as *"the* (singular) method that will finally dismantle the boundaries of the university" because it "can better account for and represent difference" (52). They argue that

transnational feminists in the Western academy can inadvertently collapse their vision of collaboration into a problematic notion of democratic community that ultimately celebrates plurality, consensus, and the representation and accommodation of difference – "presuming that there is a proper meaning to difference, one that exists prior to and outside of representation" (52-54). To bring *Tessera* into this particular debate would mean examining the productivity of the editorial collective's published depictions of their own internal discord, as well as noting if the collective's investment in consensus would be subject to Desai, Bouchard and Detournay's critique (even if it happens (at least mostly) outside of the specified university setting).

Finally, it is important to consider how the conversation between transnational feminist theory and *Tessera* intervenes in the larger context of Canadian literature. What does it mean to speak of the transnational in the context of a literature whose institutionalization was heavily indebted to cultural nationalism? Siemerling and Casteel state that some literary critics are wary of bringing Canadian literature into transnational conversations, primarily because the national has been such an important category in the relatively recent establishment of Canadian literary studies, and because the United States still seems to dominate transnational studies in the Americas (8-10). The worry is that Canadian literature would be relegated to a marginal position in relation to the US, after having already worked its way from the margins of British and American literature only since the late 1960s (9). Indeed, these concerns are at the heart of the contributions from Cynthia Sugars and Herb Wyile in *Canada and Its Americas*. I would argue that this wariness is less present in a transnational *feminist* perspective because feminism has long been engaged in a critique of the nation-state's deployment of gender stereotypes and

dependence on sexism, and because, as Moyes points out in her work on Mouré, women's fraught relationship with nationality has often led them to affiliate differently and transnationally (123). There is therefore less worry about disassociating from the category of the national. However, the transnational feminist perspective is clearly not about moving *beyond* the nation-state into a glib idealization of border-crossing (Khanna 229). As evidenced by the way that literature operates in *Scattered Hegemonies*, transnational feminism is very much invested in critiquing the category of the national. Ideally, a transnational feminist perspective at work within a nationally-defined literary field like Canadian literature should enable new localized perspectives and critiques on the relationship between literature and nation – for example by taking up Desai, Bouchard and Detournay's assertion that transnational feminism "must vigilantly critique normative multiculturalisms" (59). It can also propose different kinds of historicizations for literary production, like the one I propose of *Tessera* and of *Telling It* when I read them in terms of a hemispheric body of feminist theory.

I do not want to exaggerate the critical potentials of transnational feminism. As Alena Heitlinger points out, there is nothing inherently transformative about transnational feminism (10). I am also cognizant of the fact that in some ways, my project calls for a widened understanding of transnational feminism at a time when transnational feminism is already being critiqued for being *too* broad (Nagar and Swarr 4; Desai, Bouchard and Detournay 48). Yet it seems to me that there are all kinds of compelling tensions that arise from a transnational feminist perspective within a national literature. They are the tensions of this dissertation project, in which I am on the one hand an adamant Canadianist, arguing that we all ought to pay more attention to the contributions of specifically Canadian women

writers to larger feminist debates. On the other hand, I draw on a body of feminist literature that persistently questions constructs such as "Canadian women" because of their internal diversity and because of the importance of their extra-national connections in a globalized world. This is further nuanced by the fact that the literary site being revisited – *Tessera* – was itself invested in interrogating the parameters of literary institutions by recognizing the feminisms (plural) in Canadian letters (Godard "Women" 300). In this chapter, I have investigated these layers and tensions, demonstrating the potentials of a critical work that engages both the distances and overlaps between Canadian women's writing and transnational feminism.

Chapter Two : Telling It and the Politics of Difference

"Yet something in me can't abandon the possibility of we. Or, perhaps, can't abandon the hope that we represents: community, recognized commonality, feminist understanding that reaches across different and isolating experiences of oppression to form the basis of solidarity (yes, that political term), to support positive action on behalf of more than oneself."
- Daphne Marlatt, "Salvaging: The Subversion of Mainstream Culture in Contemporary Feminist Writing" (155).

Introducing *Telling It*

In 1988, while Daphne Marlatt was occupying the Ruth Wynn Woodward Chair of Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University, she organised a conference called *Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures*. The promotional pamphlet for the event promised that it would feature Native, Asian-Canadian and lesbian writers, "whose voices are too infrequently heard," in order to showcase their work and to discuss their relationships with their respective communities, audiences, and publishers.[27] During the two-day conference, eight writers read excerpts from their creative work and participated in panel discussions on how their writing related to their particular politics, spirituality, languages and cultures. Workshops and discussions addressed such issues as alternative versus mainstream publishing, "interfacing" the oral and the written, and politically motivated writing. The scheduling of the panels and workshops allowed ample time for questions and discussion; indeed, in addition to celebrating the work of the invited writers, Marlatt's specific intention was to create "a space for dialogue" ("Introduction" 12). She hoped particularly

[27] *Telling It* promotional pamphlet and registration form. Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 6. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

that the conversation would address "rift-lines, not the least of which are the rifts of race and sexual orientation, […] which have become so apparent in the women's movement" ("Introduction" 12). Transcripts reveal that the issue of difference within feminism did indeed surface, sometimes accompanied by palpable tension. As Marlatt states, such "rift-lines" were already apparent in feminist debates of the time, yet within the Canadian literary context, *Telling It* may well have been, as Pauline Butling claims, "the first conference to address the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality" (33).

Telling It made its mark on the Canadian feminist literary scene not only as a conference, but also as a book. Marlatt formed a collective with three of the invited writers in order to edit the sixteen hours of material recorded at the conference ("Introduction" 17). However, the text that they published with Press Gang Publishers in 1990 is much more than the abridged proceedings, as it includes an introduction by Marlatt and essays by Sky Lee, Lee Maracle and Betsy Warland, in which they reflect on some of the issues that arose at *Telling It*.[28] In her introduction, Marlatt calls their commentaries "some of the most passionate, concise and sustained analysis [sic] in the book" (18). Marlatt goes on to describe the dynamics of the editing collective, admitting that while they worked on the book, Lee, Maracle, Warland and herself dealt with cultural differences that "came into play at every level and with every decision" (18). Letters and drafts that they exchanged at the time confirm both the difficulties of their collective editing process, and their commitment to working together.[29] This question of how to collaborate without eliding

[28] The three reflective essays in the second section ("Voice(s)-Over") developed from what was originally going to be a simple afterword. When the editing collective sent their material to their contact at Press Gang Publishers, she replied that it was too long to be an afterword and was more like a conference "aftermath!" Barbara Kuhne, letter to Daphne Marlatt, 18 May 1990, Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 7. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

[29] I am referring to documents in the Marlatt and Warland fonds at the Library and Archives Canada. I discuss items from their archives in greater detail later on in this chapter.

differences was discussed at the *Telling It* conference, acted out by the Telling It Book Collective, and articulated in the *Telling It* book. It was also, as Marlatt recognized at the time, a crucial question facing North American feminists.[30] Because of their timely and original interventions into the anti-essentialist conversation that would become the crux of various streams of contemporary feminism, the *Telling It* conference and text are worth revisiting in greater detail. I read *Telling It* as a site where issues of anti-essentialist feminism manifest themselves in a Canadian literary context. I argue that reading through this feminist lens illuminates the debates of *Telling It* and contributes to a history of anti-essentialist feminist thought in Canadian literature. Like my investigation of *Tessera* in the previous chapter, this is an especially important contribution to Canadian literature because the popular genealogy of anti-essentialist and transnational feminism traces its emergence in the United States through Black feminism, Chicana feminism, womanism, and U.S. Third World feminism, whereas I focus on the parallel Canadian discussions. As I describe toward the end of this chapter, the Telling It conference can be remembered in relation to other important Canadian conferences (such as the International Feminist Book Fair), just as the text can be read in conversation with contemporaneous publications such as *Fireweed*'s 1983 special issue on Women of Colour. Drawing on the transnational feminist reading methodology that I described in my first chapter, I read these events and texts as constituting a timeline of anti-essentialist feminist thought in Canadian women's literary circles.

Over the past few decades, numerous manifestations of contemporary feminism have been concerned with identifying the exclusionary tendencies of earlier feminists and

[30] I specify "North American" feminists to acknowledge the boundaries of my research, and not to assume that other feminists elsewhere were not also dealing with these issues.

problematizing the idea that women share certain characteristics and that they compose a single cohesive group (Stone 85). At least since the 1980s, feminist criticism has been questioning the uses and usefulness of the term "women." Broadly speaking, this has happened from two different angles, as I mention (and critique) in my previous chapter wherein I describe these two angles as different manifestations of anti-essentialism (Gubar 118).[31] To recap: on the one hand, poststructuralist feminists deconstruct the sex/gender distinction and demonstrate that "women" as a category "holds no stable meaning, and the material figuring of women varies" (Khanna 214). Such poststructuralist and postmodern critiques are most popularly associated with the work of Judith Butler and the so-called French feminists. On the other hand, African-American, lesbian, postcolonial and transnational feminist scholars have also critiqued the assumptions behind the use of the term "women" because "within women's groups, what it is *to be a woman* too often means to be a white, upper-middle class, heterosexual, sighted, and hearing, Christian, Euro-American woman" (Miller 177). These critics deplore the fact that despite proclaiming global sisterhood, some feminists have ignored differently-positioned women in their own midst and constructed a far-off, Third-World, "other" woman who needed saving. These critiques have come from a variety of voices and have been foundational for multiple streams of feminism, including transnational feminism, third wave feminism, radical feminism, women of colour feminism, postcolonial feminism, and Third World feminism. Throughout this dissertation, the broad term "anti-essentialist feminism" is meant to refer to what is central to all of these feminist approaches: the denunciation of hegemony and

[31] Although it is helpful to distinguish between these two feminist approaches to difference, it is also important to question their separateness and to locate their overlaps, as I suggest in my reading of *Tessera* in my first chapter. This chapter is primarily concerned with critiques of feminist's Eurocentrism, racism, neo-imperialism and ethnocentrism.

exclusion within or supported by the women's movement, and the recognition of differences beyond sex and gender.

The first part of this chapter outlines the history of the anti-essentialism that has become so central to contemporary feminism. North American feminist scholarship has constructed a particular genealogy as a way to remember the advent of anti-essentialist feminism over the past three or four decades. The timeline includes specific writers, conferences and publications that mark watershed moments of feminist work in the North American humanities. I will summarize this timeline, focusing especially on critics who have dealt with what is "arguably the central problem facing third wave feminist theory: that its anti-essentialism risks fragmenting women as a social group, thereby dissolving the possibility of feminist politics" (Stone 94). The question implicit in this threat – the question of how to collaborate across difference – is as central to anti-essentialist feminist theory as it is to my investigations here. After the overview of anti-essentialism in contemporary feminism, followed by a section on how feminists propose to "deal with" difference, I turn back to *Telling It* and the Canadian context, a locale often conspicuously absent from histories of anti-essentialist feminism. I ask, how was feminist anti-essentialism expressed at *Telling It*? What metaphors surface as images of connecting across difference? What initiatives does *Telling It* implicitly propose for increasing communication and collaboration between differently-situated women? How does my reading strategy illuminate *Telling It*, and, conversely, how does *Telling It* illustrate the dynamics and difficulties of anti-essentialist feminism? After addressing these interpretive questions, I again evoke the possibility of the Canadian literary genealogy of anti-essentialist and transnational feminism, in which *Telling It* might figure. I will suggest that

the cross-community discussions taking place at events like Telling It partake of the considerations that are foundational for transnational feminist organising. That is, in the specific setting of Telling It, and in the global context of transnational feminist movements, feminists must grapple with defining their grounds for solidarity across difference, while being alert to the legacies of colonialism and the difficulties of respectful, context-specific collaboration.

Sisterhood Unsettled

Feminist criticism over the past few decades has been concerned with differences between women. Scholars and activists have called attention to these differences, pointed out where they have been ignored, argued that they are important and unavoidable, and considered how they affect a sense of collective purpose and the potential for collaborative action. African-American feminists are often credited with having begun this conversation in the 1970s and 1980s when they spoke out against racism and exclusion within the feminist movement.[32] Around the same time, feminists influenced by postcolonial theory began to critique some cross-cultural feminist interventions as neo-imperialistic. These criticisms brought issues of race to the forefront of feminist discussions. Other differences were soon drawn into the conversation as well: differences of sexuality and class that occasioned differences in agendas and priorities. Women of varying sexualities and racial backgrounds had of course been involved in feminist work from early on, but the time had come to question "the centrality of gender as a conceptual lens" and to assert the vast

[32] Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani suggest that this contestation actually began in the late 1960s, but the publications most often cited as the founding texts of this movement date from the 1970s and 1980s, as I detail below (487).

differences between women's experiences (Amos and Parmar 287[33]; Gubar 117). By 1992, Christina Crosby claimed that "no longer one, feminisms are marked by nation and race (Lorde's 'white american' feminism), by class, ethnicity, sexuality: black feminism, Latina feminism, lesbian feminism, middle-class 'mainstream' feminism, and so on. It would seem that dealing with the fact of differences is *the* project of women's studies today" (Crosby 131). The affirmation of difference and the critiques of "mainstream" feminism brought on some anxiety within the movement, as feminists wondered how to mobilise when "women" as a cohesive group was such a contested concept. "There is no question," write Gunew and Yeatman in their introduction to *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, "that the ability to deal with difference is at the centre of feminism's survival as a movement for social change" (xxiv).

Histories of Black feminism, postcolonial feminism, or transnational feminism reference a series of founding moments for these anti-essentialist critiques of the feminist movement. Cristina Crosby, in her article "Dealing with Differences," cites an international feminist conference in New York in 1979 as an originary instance of "the emergence of a sharp and strenuous critique of feminist criticism and theory, a critique developed largely by women of colour" (131). At the conference in question, Audre Lorde delivered her watershed speech denouncing the racism and homophobia of the women's movement and

[33] Although Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar's "Challenging Imperial Feminism" addresses British feminism, I am referring to a passage in which they discuss the long-standing involvement of Black women in American feminism. Amos and Parmar's work is exemplary of the critiques that I am describing here. In the early 1980s, they begin to identify the way in which a particular tradition, white Eurocentric and Western, has sought to establish itself as the only legitimate feminism in current cultural practice" (287). They argue that the feminist movement in Britain is oppressive for black and working-class women because it has "unquestioningly been premised on a celebration of 'sisterhood' with its implicit assumption that women qua women have a necessary basis for unity and solidarity" (286-287). Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani suggest that critiques like theirs paralleled those emerging in the United States at the same time (487, footnote 15).

of that particular conference. Her talk, famously entitled "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," was published in her collection *Sister Outsider* in 1984. Another foundational text for anti-essentialist feminist critique in North America is *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*, edited by Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga and published in 1981. Anzaldua and Moraga identify a "class and color war" within the feminist movement (61), a "war" that is also addressed by bell hooks in her *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, which came out that same year. hook's challenge to the white, bourgeois exclusivity of the American feminist movement has been, in her own words, "sometimes harsh and unrelenting" (*Feminist* 15). References to Lorde, hooks, Anzaldua, and Moraga are prominent in histories of anti-essentialist feminism found in anthologies and readers on feminism and race, or transnational feminism. Such histories will also reference writers like Paula Gunn Allen, who depict the plight of indigenous women in America, and Elizabeth Spelman, whose 1988 *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* is commemorated as a pioneering work on racism and sexism (Sue Morgan 273; Stone 86; Young "Gender as" 188-189). A host of other writers and publications could just as easily figure in a brief overview of anti-essentialist feminist thought in the North American humanities.[34] The point here is not to suggest that these events and publications are the most representative of feminism in the 1980s, or even that they were the absolute first to express anti-essentialist critiques of the

[34] Indeed, when Susan Stanford Friedman discusses differences among women based on categories such as race, class, sexuality, religion and national identity, she notes that "Black feminists of the 1970s such as Frances Beal, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Alice Walker, Barbara Smith, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde were among the early pioneers of this discussion to which feminists like Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Adrienne Rich, Gloria T. Hull, Alice Chai, Amy Ling, Paula Gunn Allen, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Biddy Martin, Bonnie Zimmerman, Gayatri Spivak, Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Harstock, Teresa de Lauretis, Donna Haraway, Chela Sandoval, Linda Alcoff, Lisa Lowe, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lata Mani, and many others added to in the 1980s and 1990s" (22).

movement. Rather, I mention them in order to continentally situate my discussion of *Telling It*, as well as to demonstrate *how* we remember the beginnings of transnational, African-American and postcolonial feminisms in the humanities. That is, we imagine their beginnings by citing specific collectives, conferences and publications as part of a timeline of contemporary feminist thought as it addresses difference. This is the kind of genealogy that this dissertation imagines for Canadian literature through my explorations of a journal (*Tessera*), a conference (*Telling It*), a film (*Listening for Something…*) and literary texts that address collaboration and difference ("In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" and *Venous Hum*).

Anti-essentialist feminists of the period, like those mentioned above, were critiquing the mainstream feminist movement for presuming to speak for all women while ignoring its white, bourgeois biases. A similar, more internationally-focused critique came from anti-essentialist, postcolonial, and transnational feminists who challenged the way Western feminism interpreted and intervened in the lives of non-Western women. One scholar often associated with this endeavour is Chandra Talpade Mohanty, whose famous article, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," was first published in 1986. Like Lorde, Anzaldua, hooks, and their compatriots, Mohanty denounces the "assumption that all women, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group. […] This is an assumption that characterizes much feminist discourse" (*Feminism* 22). Rather than critiquing the inner workings of the American feminist movement, however, Mohanty's frame of reference is global and her specific subject is the production of a "Third World woman" in Western feminist discourse. Focusing specifically on texts written by feminist sociologists, anthropologists, and

journalists for the Zed Press Women in the Third World series, she argues that some feminist scholarship exhibits a "latent ethnocentrism" by constructing a monolithic, underdeveloped "Third World Woman" in need of rescue by liberated Western women (39-42). Revisiting this article in 2002, Mohanty explains that in publishing "Under Western Eyes," her "most simple goal was to make clear that cross-cultural feminist work must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes" (223). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has also been an immensely influential voice reflecting on the potentials and pitfalls of inter-national and cross-difference feminist collaboration, albeit in a more deconstructive mode than Mohanty. Like Mohanty, she revisits her most famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (originally published in 1988) in her 1999 "History." Both texts deal with the historical and global accessibility of the voices of colonized, racialized women. Other feminist critics publishing in the 1980s offered denunciations of the neo-imperialism embedded in some feminist rhetoric and interventions. In an article that appeared shortly after "Under Western Eyes," Caren Kaplan asserts that,

> All women are not equal, and we do not all have the same experiences (even of gender oppression). When we insist upon gender alone as a universal system of explanation we sever ourselves from other women. […] First world feminist criticism is struggling to avoid repeating the same imperializing moves that we claim to protest. (194)

Aihwa Ong, in an article published in 1988, analyses these "imperializing moves" by focusing on how feminism manifests the "neo-colonial preoccupations [that] continue to haunt Western perceptions of ex-colonial societies" (109). Mohanty, Spivak, Kaplan, and Ong reveal the deeply engrained colonial attitudes of some feminist analyses.

The critical interventions of Mohanty, Spivak, Kaplan, and Ong, among others, called for a feminist methodology that recognized the complexities of women's subjectivities in their diverse contexts. This anti-essentialist, transnational or postcolonial viewpoint was often articulated in opposition to a simplistic "global sisterhood" approach to international feminist solidarity. In fact, in some texts, the phrase "global sisterhood" becomes synonymous with an imperialistic international feminism that ignores differences between women (Friedman 25).[35] For instance, Mary Hawkesworth asserts that, "proponents of 'global sisterhood' elide material differences in power, resources, and interests among women within and across nations" ("When" 7). Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan articulate a similar critique in the introduction to *Scattered Hegemonies*. They argue that the Western "sisterhood" model of feminism is flawed and that "global" feminism has often meant Western cultural imperialism, in contrast to a transnational approach that is alert to multiple, overlapping oppressions involving more than just gender (4, 17). The use of the phrase "global sisterhood" to represent the nemesis of transnational feminism recalls Robin Morgan's 1984 anthology *Sisterhood is Global*. Indeed, Morgan was criticized for universalizing women's experiences to suggest that all women share a common oppression and common goals (Mohanty "Feminist" 71-80; Narain 241). *Sisterhood is Global* is an important publication in its own right, as perhaps the first anthology of international feminist voices, but it is also memorable for the critique that it spawned. Even as she recognizes the "significant value" of Morgan's anthology, Mohanty sums up the opposition that it helped to engender: "There is considerable difference between international feminist

[35] For further critiques of "global sisterhood," Susan Stanford Friedman points to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "French Feminism in an International Frame," Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres' *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, and *Scattered Hegemonies*, mentioned above.

networks organized around specific issues like sex tourism and multinational exploitation of women's work, and the notion of *an* international women's movement which […] implicitly *assumes* global or universal sisterhood" ("Feminist" 71).

In sum, feminists who challenge the exclusivity of mainstream Western feminism and feminists who criticize the latent neo-imperialism of some Western feminist interventions are all questioning the idea of an easily-assumed "sisterhood" between differently-situated women. Whether on an international, national, or more local scale, Lorde, Mohanty, hooks, Spivak, Kaplan, etc. are all grappling with the difficulties of relating across difference. Often, their task is to show how differences have been constructed, disrespected, ignored, or repressed in feminist work that overlooks colonial legacies and fails to consider identity factors such as class, sexualities, race, and nationality. These arguments form a theoretical base for anti-essentialist feminism as manifest in transnational feminist networks, for example. But for such feminist collaboration to actually exist, there must also be theorization on how to respect difference and to relate productively and justly with differently positioned women. As Ranjana Khanna points out, the strength of transnational feminism is its insistence on feminist ethics and local contexts; however, this strength has also been a weakness when differences have been emphasized to the point that coalition seems impossible (208-209). The following section surveys some of the conceptual and practical solutions that feminists have proposed for dealing with this supposed impasse. How, they ask, might feminist coalition be imagined in light of the stringent anti-essentialist critiques of recent decades?

Dealing with Difference

When "dealing with the fact of differences" became "*the* project of women's studies today" (Crosby 131; emphasis in original), it engendered some anxiety about the future of feminist mobilisation. Writing from Australia in 1994, Ien Ang begins an article by proclaiming that, "For some time now, the problematic of race and ethnicity has thrown feminism into crisis" (394). The impression of being "in crisis" was the result of anti-essentialist feminist critiques that had so effectively identified the vast differences between women, and the racist, exclusionary underpinnings of much Western feminism. Feminists began to wonder what grounds for solidarity could be constructed out of the deconstructive mode of anti-essentialist critique. Since "women" had become such a contested, internally diverse, perhaps even defunct category, what – or who – might constitute a rallying point for feminist action? Various feminist scholars, such as Iris Marion Young and Spivak, proposed non-exclusive ways of imagining "women" as a viable unifying category. Others have addressed difference from a different angle, by focusing on the inclusion of differently situated women (*as per* standpoint theory, commonly associated with Nancy Hartsock) in feminist projects in order that such projects might be just and representative. As I illustrate below, some feminists take a step back and criticise the way that "difference" has become an ill-defined buzzword within feminist discourse, or that differences between women might be exaggerated in feminist discourse. Whatever the position, the concept of difference had been definitively deployed within Western feminist dialogue. Because it troubles the core grounds of feminist action, feminists have felt compelled to assess and address its impact on the movement, from a variety of positions. This section provides an overview of numerous important examples of feminist attempts to "deal with difference."

On a discursive level, there is of course the question of how feminists could be united by a term – "women" – that has been so thoroughly challenged. Iris Marion Young describes the dilemma:

> On the one hand, without some sense in which "woman" is the name of a social collective, there is nothing specific to feminist politics. On the other hand, any effort to identify the attributes of that collective appears to undermine feminist politics by leaving out some women whom feminists ought to include. (188)

Young herself proposes a solution to this predicament: via Sartre's concept of seriality, she suggests that for political purposes, gender could be thought of as a "series" (197). Young defines a series as a kind of shifting collectivity that does not demand uniformity among its members, who are inevitably united around certain objects or practico-inert structures (202-203). Within the series of women, there may be social and historical sub-series, and women may also belong to other series; they might also form groups (feminisms), which would be only partially related to the series because such groups will always intentionally be based on some other affinity and purpose (212). For Young, thinking of gender through seriality allows for a anti-essentialist conception of women that is more productive than theorizing gender identity as multiple or arguing that women comprise a group only in the context of feminist politics (positions which Young attributes to Elizabeth Spelman and Diana Fuss respectively) (193-196).

Alison Stone identifies Young's seriality concept as one of the most significant responses to the feminist anti-essentialist dilemma. The other response that Stone mentions is the "strategic essentialism" proposed by Spivak and demonstrated, according to Stone, by Luce Irigaray and Denise Riley (Stone 88-89). Strategic essentialism is a feminist tool by which essentialism is recognized as descriptively erroneous but is nonetheless employed for

feminist political purposes. Spivak discussed her own deployment of strategic essentialism in a 1984 interview. She states that although her interest is ultimately in the "the working out [of] the heterogeneous production of sexed subjects," she still refers to the "universal" oppression of women ("Criticism" 11). "Rhetorically," she argues, feminists must speak against essentialism and universalism but pretences to an anti-essentialist "theoretical purity" must also give way to strategic essentialism ("Criticism" 11-12). Spivak views this as a way of recuperating and subverting the blind essentialism of ethnocentric feminism: "How can the unexamined universalising discourse of a certain sort of feminism become useful for use, since this is the hegemonic space of feminist discourse?" (11).

Reviewing Spivak's strategic essentialism and Young's seriality, Stone herself finds fault with both and proposes another option: thinking of women as a genealogy (91-94). According to Stone, the various historical constructions of femininity form overlapping links in a long chain that make up a "distinctive (although complex, internally diverse) history within which women are (differently) situated" (94), which she refers to as a genealogy. Stone posits a strategy for conceiving of "women" as some sort of group without assuming the internal unity of that group. In contrast, Chantal Mouffe distances herself from such attempts. For Mouffe, feminists can "struggle against the multiple forms in which the category "woman" is constructed in subordination" without necessarily conceiving of women as a "definable empirical group with a common essence and identity" (329). Mouffe sees radical anti-essentialism that deconstructs even the subject as a rational and knowable agent as a necessary step in feminist politics, rather than an anxiety-inducing move that stunts feminist work (317). Another alternative view is presented by Nancy Hartsock, and echoed by Mary Hawkesworth. They advocate "standpoint theory" in which

different women bring different concerns to feminist work so that "differences among people create the possibilities for complementarity and creativity" (Hartsock 68). Practically speaking, feminist groups make sure that they include a variety of differently-situated women, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of universalizing or ghettoizing (69). Hawkesworth explains that, "As an analytical tool, feminist standpoint analysis accepts plurality as an inherent characteristic of the human condition and uses the comparison of multiple and competing views as a strategy for knowledge production" (Hawkesworth *Feminist* 177). Although I am mentioning Hawkesworth and Spivak, Mouffe and Young as examples of a general tendency, the assumptions and details of each of their positions are extremely diverse and sometimes at odds with each other. For instance, Hawkesworth's version of "standpoint theory" might jar with Spivakean feminist poststructuralism. Indeed, in the context of *Feminists Theorize the Political*'s engagement with the feminism/ poststructuralism debate, Sharon Marcus critiques Hawkesworth's critique of postmodern thought, demonstrating how feminist standpoint theorists and postmodern feminists can clash (385-387). The poststructuralist feminist would fault the standpoint feminist for her perceived empiricism and naïveté towards language; the standpoint feminist would fault the poststructuralist feminist for ignoring women's "real" bodies and experiences, being too focused on texts and for delaying activist political action.

Furthermore, it may also necessary to take a step back and to recognize that this whole "dealing with difference" conversation may be problematic, especially in terms of unproblematized calls for inclusivity. For instance, Ien Ang asserts that the feminist project of solidarity across differences is often articulated in a way that is idealistic and unrealistically enamoured with the possibilities of honest dialogue (396). Ang argues that

mostly white, Western, middle-class women want to accommodate differences within a new-and-improved feminist community "without challenging the naturalized legitimacy and status of that community *as* a community" (396, 407). Against this politics of inclusion, Ang proposes a "politics of partiality" in which feminists would emphasize the limits of feminism and would pay attention to the moments when communication across differences resoundingly fails (396, 407). In an essay on " 'Race', Gender and the Concept of 'Difference' in Feminist Thought," Mary Maynard also points out some of the pitfalls of the way that difference is discussed in Western feminist discourse. She argues that, "the concept of difference is not sufficient or weighty enough to encompass all the dimensions that analyses of 'race' and gender need to include" (20). Furthermore, Maynard notes that evoking differences between women sometimes only gestures toward the endless diversity and plurality that exists between humans, without addressing the complex workings of power in and through those differences (18). Maynard's critique of the feminist debates about difference parts ways with Ang's when Maynard suggests that perhaps the focus on difference has been exaggerated, at the expense of recognizing what women might still have in common (18). Kathy Davis, who recently published a case study of transnational feminism at work in the global circulation of American feminist classic *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, would agree with Maynard. Davis writes that, "While postcolonial feminist scholarship tends to highlight difference as the sine qua non of any feminist alliance across national borders, the transnational alliances around *Our Bodies, Ourselves* indicate that the similarities or commonalities among women may be equally important" (209).[36] These

[36] She cites Sandra Lee Bartky and Fred Pfeil in support of this point (Davis 252 footnote 8), in reference to Bartky's *"Sympathy and Solidarity" and Other Essays* and Pfeil's "No Basta Teorizar: In-difference to Solidarity in Contemporary Fiction, Theory, and Practice" in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*.

diverse critiques of the feminist deployment of difference (is it an effective analytical tool? does it slip into liberal pluralism? what about failure? what about successful solidarity?) inform my own investigation of the way in which difference operated between the women at *Telling It*.

As I turn back to *Telling It*, it is important to call attention to the fact that this brief overview of anti-essentialism and difference in contemporary Western feminist thought in the humanities has referred mostly to texts and scholars based in the United States. Generally speaking, to research keywords connected to this history is to be directed to primarily American references. This is not inherently regrettable, nor am I suggesting that Canada needs a nation-based database of anti-essentialist and transnational feminist texts all its own. However, I am compelled to wonder which Canadian texts, conferences, and writers from recent decades might figure in a history of contemporary feminism equivalent to the popular, U.S.-based one that I have outlined and that has shaped my reading strategy for this project. Would *Telling It* be remembered as a site where issues of anti-essentialist and postcolonial feminism were prioritized and debated, just as I have argued that *Tessera* can be read in terms of transnational feminism? Moving from a general discussion of anti-essentialism and difference in recent feminist scholarship, the following sections narrows my focus to *Telling It*, a moment wherein Canadian women writers discuss difference and enact connections.

Revisiting Telling It

Discussing anti-essentialist feminist theory in connection with literature is an endeavour for which there are numerous notable precedents. In fact, the literary has always been central to the development of contemporary Western feminist thought. In my first chapter, I mentioned the fundamental connections between literary analysis and the development of transnational feminist theory, as seen in *Scattered Hegemonies*, for instance. We might also mention the work of Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, widely acclaimed poets who were so influential in challenging racist and ethnocentric American feminism. In addition, founding text *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour* is an anthology that includes not only essayistic critique, but also fiction and poetry. Spivak's use of the literary is also central to her feminist scholarship, as seen in her engagement with literary works by Emily Brontë, Jean Rhys, Mary Shelley, J. M. Coetzee, and Mahasweta Devi. These examples are not meant to suggest that the literary is at the service of feminist theory, waiting in the wings to provide convenient, self-contained illustrations for whatever argument. Rather, I am evoking the history of complex intermingling between literature and contemporary feminist theory, which provides a precedent for the feminist reading strategy that I bring to bear on *Telling It* and on Canadian women's writing.

In the Canadian literary context, Susan Knutson's article "Imagine Her Surprise" (originally published in *Tessera*) offers a more precise precedent for my work with *Telling It*. Knutson links *Telling It* to Italian feminism and specifically to the work of the Milan Women's Bookstore collective and to Teresa de Lauretis's writing on essentialism and feminist theory. In her opening section, Knutson also references her own geographical

positioning ("my *petit coin d'Acadie*") as well as the work of Québécoise feminist Nicole Brossard and the "emergence d'une culture au féminin" in Quebec enunciated by Marisa Zavalloni (Knutson 228-229). At the outset, therefore, Knutson is tracing connections from Italy to the extremities of Canada (*Telling It* in Vancouver and herself in *Acadie*) with a short detour in Quebec. Knutson explains that she uses Italian feminist theory (especially the Milan Women's Bookstore collective's concepts of "symbolic mother" and "female genealogy") as a paradigm through which to understand and articulate what took place at *Telling It* (230). She identifies *Telling It* as an example of "*praxis*" of the theory developed by de Lauretis and the Milan Women's Bookstore collective, and she asserts, "I don't think I am simply developing an analogy; it seems that certain aspects of our practice translate over the cultural divide" (230). The readiness with which Knutson establishes a transatlantic connection between *Telling It* and Italian theory is intriguing, given that I connect *Telling It* to transnational feminism. Equally resonant is Knutson's use of the term "genealogy" in her discussion of *Telling It*. For her, "female genealogy" denotes women proactively defining themselves in relation to other women in order to construct a relationship of belonging (232-233). Thus, when Sky Lee writes about belonging to a "woman of colour context" in her essay in *Telling It*, Knutson reads this as Lee writing her genealogy. I am interested in extending the relationship between *Telling It* and genealogy in a different direction, by suggesting that the event and publication overall can be seen as "belonging" to a genealogy of anti-essentialist feminist thought. Knutson might agree with this reading, as she also connects *Telling It* to debates on essentialism and difference in feminism (230-231).

My reading of *Telling It* is grouped below into four sub-sections. In each section, I describe a focal theme of *Telling It* and read that topic through the retrospective essays from the "Voice(s)-Over" portion of the text while commenting on its connection to anti-essentialist feminist theory and history. In the first section, I highlight the moments when conference participants denounce exclusions within the women's movement, enunciate the differences inherent to their sense of identity, and call on women to connect and collaborate nonetheless. The second section deals with racism manifest and discussed at *Telling It*, followed by a section on the hard work of collaboration, which examines the dynamics of the editing collective. I end with a self-reflexive note on the ethics of the archival research that has informed this chapter.

1. Enunciating Differences / Desiring Connection

The volume edited by the Telling It Book Collective reveals that a central dynamic of anti-essentialist feminism – the need to assert difference while cultivating coalition – came up repeatedly in presentations and in audience discussions at the conference. Betsy Warland notes that for some participants, this venue was the first in which they "began to speak their differences in perception more publicly" (196). It was important for some attendees to articulate defining elements of their identities (primarily related to sexuality and/or to racial and cultural backgrounds), to assert their right to be recognized, and to point out that these differences are often ignored or disdained. During her talk, Barbara Herringer stated that, "We're all human, they say, well yeah, OK, we are, but we're also beings with differences that need to be acknowledged and that really cry out to be

celebrated" (101). These declarations of differences (and ensuing conflicts) lead one reviewer to conclude that, "If anything, *Telling It* demystifies the cult of sisterhood typically identified with the women's movement" (Prime). While *Telling It* participants would certainly deny a superficial "cult of sisterhood" approach to feminism, they seem to view the articulation and recognition of their different standpoints as necessary steps to foster and enhance a sense of unity. That is, the articulation and recognition of difference initially brings with it a sense of hope for greater feminist potential, rather than a sense of anxiety or crisis about the future of feminism. For instance, audience member Peg Klesner declares that, "When we identify ourselves as lesbian writers or as Native writers or as Punjabi writers, we have differences that we can share to enlarge our own understanding of women in general" (Telling It Book Collective "Panel One" 44).[37] Similarly, Sandy Shreve, a participant who also helped Daphne Marlatt to organize the conference, calls on lesbian women and heterosexual women to dialogue and learn from each other (TIBC "Panel Two" 129). Betsy Warland also sees recognizing difference as a move toward greater collaboration: "I think we can't come to this love for each other until we understand our differences, that's the step we can't skip" (TIBC "Panel One" 52). For these women, the assertion of difference is not an impediment to connections, but rather a necessary step toward genuine partnership. Hence one reviewer sums up *Telling It* this way: "This collective is concerned that we can not love each other until we can understand our differences" (Souter). Some contemporary feminist theorists have expressed profound

[37] Concerning the parenthical documentation for *Telling It*: when a section of the book is individually authored (such as the introduction by Marlatt or the retrospective essays at the end of the book), my reference refers specifically to that piece (e.g. Marlatt "Introduction" or Warland "Where"). In this case, the reference is to a section that contains an edited transcript of a panel and audience discussion. I have chosen to list the author as The Telling It Book Collective, in keeping with the authorial identification on the cover of the *Telling It* volume. For purposes of readability, this collective will hereafter be referred to in parenthetical references with its initials (TIBC).

scepticism regarding the possibility for such "understanding" of differences. For instance, Spivak's question "can the subaltern speak?" is ultimately the question of whether or not oppressed and alternative voices can even be heard from other subject positions. At this point, I am pointing out that many of the *Telling It* participants express confidence in the kind of "honest dialogue" found suspect by Ien Ang in quotation above; further along in this chapter, I address the failures of these aspirations.

Spatial and architectural metaphors of gaps and bridges are used to express the desire for understanding across diversity, and these metaphors find their way into the book reviews of *Telling It* as well. In the discussion following a panel entitled "Across the Cultural Gap," one audience member makes a typical comment: "This is about closing the gaps. There *are* differences in languages, there *are* differences in experience, and we need to talk about them, we need to understand each other so that those gaps that people try and make between women become bridged" (TIBC "Panel One" 47). Jeannette Armstrong also looks forward to the point at which "we can begin to cross these cultural and racial and social and class and size gaps" (TIBC "Panel One" 48). Contemporaneous book reviews for *Telling It* echo this language, asserting that *Telling It* "tries to bridge the cultural gap between modern feminist women" (Souter), makes "efforts to reach across the gap and heal the hurt" (We), and deals with what is "essential to the building of a movement bridging cultures and races" (Decter 75). One review is simply entitled "Making a bridge" (Cockerton). Betsy Warland's talk on the "Across the Cultural Gap" panel is a sustained engagement with etymologies, expressions and clichés that use the word "gap" (to blow the gap, to stop two gaps with one bush, to open the gap, etc.) through which she discusses her

relationship with language and sexuality. She ends by proclaiming that, "we need all the dialects, ***to fill in the gap***, make up a deficiency, fill in a vacant space" (35).

The conversations of *Telling It*, therefore, suggest that there are gaps between women because of the racism, homophobia and other discriminations that cloud their cross-cultural communications. Articulating their different standpoints and exposing misunderstandings and oppressions between women are meant to help to bridge such gaps. The poetry of Betsy Warland fosters a theorization of this process. In one of the essayistic poems that she presented at *Telling It*, Warland writes about "difference = invisibility: the ground of our meeting":

> as we encounter difference within the feminist communities we are enraged when our disparate names are denied: we are terrified that we will be rendered invisible yet again in the very place we had held out our hope of finally *being seen*
>
> this is a well-grounded fear, for as women *our difference has meant our invisibility*: experience has given us little reason to trust it. (76)

Warland's insights here offer one theory of why the articulation of difference is so crucial, so sensitive, and why such articulations can be mobilized toward bridge-building. That is, a deep recognition of the differences between women is an inherently anti-patriarchal move, since, for Warland, sexism equates female difference with invisibility. In one of her collected essays, Daphne Marlatt expresses something similar: "Our reaching across what divides us in class, race and religion, our continual questing for what we share, even as we refuse to elide our differences for the sake of a "unified voice" – all this is subversive of the old script of oppositions" (*Readings* 66). The "old script of oppositions" sets up a binary between men and women, and negates women for not being men, thereby rendering women invisible, as Warland describes. Warland argues that difference becomes a central and

difficult issue for feminists because women have been silenced for being different. Her analysis reminds us that, "the concept, 'difference,' has a long history in relation to Western feminism" (Maynard 13). Before it became a shorthand term to refer to the differences between women, the concept of difference was crucial to first-wave feminists concerned with "the degree to which women were the same as or different from men" (Maynard 14).

Ironically, the binary reasoning of patriarchy (the men/women difference) is, to some extent, the same binary that kept women from addressing the differences between themselves, locally and on a global scale. Those who decry a "global sisterhood" mentality argue that when there is a focus on "selective commonalities, such as the power differential between men and women," other differences – of subjectivities and oppressions – are ignored (Hawkesworth, "When" 7). In other words,

> In the contemporary era of multiply contested oppressions, feminism has been forced to lose its innocence. It has had to discover that it is predicated on the assumption that gender is the most salient base of oppression, and that this assumption is always going to be most compelling for those women who do not experience ethnicity, race and class as additional bases of oppression. (Yeatman 228)

Here lies a point of convergence between the conversations of *Telling It* and the foundations of anti-essentialist feminist thought. Like the women of colour feminists who challenged the exclusivity of the American feminist movement in the 1980s, the women of *Telling It* are grappling with the differences between them and insisting that such differences can no longer be glossed over. To express difference, to denounce difference-based persecution or elision, and to pursue coalition across difference are all strategies that resonate with the premises of contemporary anti-essentialist thought as it has informed

transnational feminism. The fact that the *Telling It* participants as well as the book critics use spatial metaphors to discuss their various positionings is another initial point of connection with contemporary feminist theory because language evoking space and location (what Susan Stanford Friedman calls a "new geographics of identity" 21) is often characteristic of feminist theory addressing complicity and anti-essentialism. I address the spatial metaphorics of contemporary feminism in greater detail in the following chapter; for the moment, suffice it to say that in their enunciation of difference and their desire for connections, the women of *Telling It* are engaging in anti-essentialist feminist theorising. Their interventions speak to the larger debates of Western feminism at the time. In light of the fact that the deployment of difference in feminist discourse has engendered a fair amount of anxiety about the future of feminism, it is interesting to see *Telling It* participants arguing that addressing difference is a building block to future feminist action, rather than a deterrent.

2. Racism and Colonial Hauntings

In the opening sentence of her essay in *Telling It*, Lee Maracle writes, "I warn myself before I leave my insulated world and attempt to connect with white Canadians at the *Telling It* conference that in a racially dichotomized society in which white supremacy colours everyone's attitude this connection is bound to grate against the flesh" ("Ramparts" 161). She goes on to pronounce the conference "difficult, because the women came from so many different cultures. […] They also brought with them whatever remnants they had of the patriarchal and racist culture from which we were all nurtured" (161-162). Maracle

approached this inter-cultural meeting of women with the hard-won knowledge that racism would inevitably shape and sully the dialogue. Based on the experience of First Nations peoples in a Canadian context, Maracle's understanding of the dynamics of oppression and resistance identifies what Sherene Razack calls the "interlocking systems of domination" at the core of the global matrix of capitalism, racism, ableism and heterosexism (*Looking* 12, 22). Maracle declares that even a well-intentioned group of feminists, uniting on the grounds of anti-sexism, will inevitably come up against racism in their midst, given the intimately related operations of racism and sexism. "We must stop being shocked," she writes, "when our comrades, our potential fighting partners, exhibit manifestations of race, sex and class bias" ("Ramparts" 173-174).

Yet in the context of *Telling It*, Maracle also asserts in the midst of disillusionment and difficulty, confronting the overlapping oppressions of racism, sexism and colonialism might form a grounds for feminist collaboration. She thus joins the ranks of the *Telling It* participants who affirm that recognising difference can lead to greater group cohesion, but she is much more overt than some in her evocations of race and privilege. In her talk on the first panel of the conference, Maracle concludes emphatically: "I want this world to never forget its short but cruel history of racial, national and sexual oppression" ("Just" 41). During the subsequent audience discussion, Maracle specifies that "a struggle against national, sexist, and racist oppression" is what "we have in common" (TIBC "Panel One" 49). She maintains that, "we're not speaking from a position of equals here. What's at the very bottom line of overcoming any kind of discrimination is a real coming together where a real exchange takes place. Not just my having to come to *you* but when do you cross *my* bridge?" (TIBC "Panel One" 49). Maracle identifies a struggle against various overlapping

oppressions as a common project, but she is adamant that within that struggle, women are differently situated. Here, however, Maracle makes an important distinction by insisting that white women engage in such a struggle by recognising that they are also victims of such oppressions. To this end, she writes, "No one supports me because I need it, but because they are against the racial inequities built into this system, and those inequities violate white people and coloured alike" ("Ramparts" 172). Similarly: "We understand that trust between women of colour and white women requires that white women take on racism, fight it at every opportunity as though they truly believed that this fight was in their own interest because it is" ("Afterword" 175). Mary Maynard points out that feminist analyses of 'race' sometimes focus on victims of racism, implicitly labelling "them" as "the problem," and thereby avoiding any sustained analysis of whiteness as a complex racial category (21).[38] In contrast to this, Maracle effectively addresses white women when she addresses racism. She exhibits a similar strategy of self-interested solidarity across differences of sexuality when she aligns herself with lesbian women: "In the end, it is for my self that I oppose the silencing of Lesbian women, not because I seek allies among them, but rather that I choose to preserve myself: my sense of humanity is violated if another human being is offended" ("Ramparts" 170).

[38] Throughout the 1990s, anti-essentialist feminists continued to call for nuanced theorizations of the position of white women within racialized discourse (Brah 109-110, Ang 397). The different meanings of whiteness, and the nature of white privilege, were discussed briefly during the conversations of *Telling It* (47, 48, 52). The function of whiteness in the editing collective is also interesting, as glimpsed in a comment from Betsy Warland: "I am the only White woman writing a commentary and because of racism and the upheaval around lesbianism I have keenly felt my words being scrutinized." (Telling It 192). Consider also an excerpt from a letter to Warland from her editor at Press Gang, discussing a draft of her essay for the *Telling It* volume: "When I read the earlier version you submitted I immediately had reservations about it – I wished it were different. And I found myself scrutinizing my reaction, asking "am I judging this commentary more harshly than the others because it's by a white woman and so it's safer for me to criticize?" Barbara Kuhne, letter to Betsy Warland, 30 May 1990, Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 7. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

Maracle's interventions emphasize that women are complexly connected across their differences not only through one woman's complicity in another's oppression, but also because they might choose to cultivate a nuanced and respectful solidarity. Maracle points out that fighting against the very oppressions in which they are entangled might supply the common ground needed for meaningful transcultural collaboration. Her contributions to the *Telling It* conversation never lose sight of inequality (particularly that of Native women – 40, 165), but she also calls for bridge-building. In fact, Maracle uses a slightly different metaphor to describe the closing of the gaps: that of ramparts. Before presenting at the conference, she recalls searching for words that "would finally begin to build the ramparts to the bridge which would allow us to meet as equals" (163). During the editing process for the *Telling It* volume, there seems to have been some question about the word "ramparts." In a letter to Daphne Marlatt, Maracle specifies that,

> ramparts is correct.as (sic) I used it: the embankment built of earth, an earth mound built as a defense synonymous with embankment. Ramp is usually standing on its own similar to the structure of a bridge, i.e.
>
> Please use ramparts as it has significance to us who have been raised in the tradition of the catholic church. Ramparts is the name of a catholic lay magazine based on what is now called "liberation theology" that was published in the sixties and signifies the earth embankment to a just world on earth that will get us more surely to heaven.[39]

Maracle has a very specific, and very fitting, image in mind. As she explains, the ramparts metaphor has historical resonance. This attention to history is appropriate given that Maracle exposes the colonial history underlying the cross-racial interactions at *Telling It*. Maracle defines a rampart as "an earth mound built as a defense," which evokes militaristic

[39] Lee Maracle, letter to Daphne Marlatt, undated, Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 1. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

images of trenches and troops united against a common cause. While the image Maracle evokes is far from being violent, the militaristic undertones do tie in with her call for differently-positioned women to unite in struggle. The image of the ramparts is also evocative in that it is built of earth, and Maracle thereby distinguishes it from a freestanding bridge or ramp. That is, Maracle is concerned with the *grounds* on which women can connect, and her metaphor emphasizes the importance of the *foundations* for bridge-building. Unfortunately, she concludes after the *Telling It* conference that, "those ramparts are still hanging in the air in that room, dusty and unused" ("Ramparts" 163). In contrast to ramparts grounded on earth, built from earth, and mounting toward justice, the *Telling It* ramparts are spatially opposite: "hanging in the air."

As a Native woman who insists on the uniqueness of Aboriginal peoples, Maracle refuses to relinquish difference and speaks frankly of the difficulties of connecting across gaps ("We accept in theory that we are culturally separate, yet, in practice, we lash out if the actual interaction is not up to our expectations" 162). Yet Maracle proposes that grounds for connection can be found in a sense of common struggle and that even women who are not victims of racism should cultivate anti-racism in their own interest. Her recommendations echo Barbara Smith's, from the important 1982 American collection *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Smith asserts that, "White women don't work on racism to do a favour for someone else, solely to benefit Third World women. You have to comprehend how racism distorts and lessens your own lives as white women – that racism affects your chances for survival, too, and that it is very definitely your issue" (49). The "self-interested solidarity" that Maracle proposes is also anti-colonial in its blurring of victim/oppressor boundaries. That is, Maracle invites white

women to engage in anti-racist feminism not to "save" racially-suppressed women (Mohanty's "Third World woman" comes to mind) but because they themselves are also harmed by racist regimes. I characterize this move as anti-colonial because "Imperialism demands that we understand women either as victims or agents, as saviours or as saved, but not as complicated subjects acting within several hegemonic systems" (Razack "Your" 50). Maracle is especially alert to the "hegemonic systems" (Razack) of racism and sexism, and her anti-colonial rhetoric at and in *Telling It* bring in issues of history, complicity and the search for viable grounds for connection.

3. Silence and the Hard Work of Collaboration

The women who participated in the *Telling It* conference were obviously committed, at least ostensibly, to dialoguing and connecting across their various differences; the above citations from the presentations and discussions attest to this. Some of the quotes I have highlighted from the conference, like those from Maracle, for example, express just how difficult this can be. Jeannette Armstrong also spoke eloquently about the hazards of cross-cultural communication, in this case between Native and non-Native people: "I do at all times speak to my people when I'm writing. Whenever I waver from that I get lost; I can't speak to the newcomers and when I do it becomes dangerous because I don't know your metaphors. I don't know what your thinking is" (27). Many of the critics who reviewed the *Telling It* book when it was published in 1990 note that the dialoguing "across cultures" sounds strenuous. "Although the women frequently offer words of encouragement and support," writes one reviewer, "emotions often run high with anger and

frustration" (Prime). "Emotional honesty, pain and analysis" are listed as the key ingredients of the conference (Souter), and another journalist concludes that, "This is not an easy task, this telling across cultures. It requires listening across cultures, hearing, thinking and even responding" (Decter). Anti-essentialist and anti-racist feminist theory often explores the potential theoretical grounds on which coalition might materialize, and the *Telling It* conference also does this to a certain extent. However, the Telling It Book Collective, intentionally comprised of women who self-identify with various communities, provides an rich case study of the arduous task of actual cross-cultural collaboration.

Daphne Marlatt invited Sky Lee, Lee Maracle and Betsy Warland to form an editing collective with her because it seemed geographically feasible (they all lived in Vancouver at the time) but also because they "represented each of the three communities featured at the conference" (Marlatt "Introduction" 17). In a Canada Council grant application form, Marlatt explained that it was important to form such a collective "because editing can be a subtly political activity when it comes to deciding what to include or cut, or how much to shift an oral voice to the printed page."[40] The editing collective recognized that there was nothing neutral about their task; rather, the editorial decisions that they would make together partook of issues of voice and representation. However, both Marlatt and Warland admit in the final publication that they were surprised by how difficult it was to edit as a group. In her introduction, Marlatt writes that it was shocking to discover that items she took for granted (related to punctuation and grammar) actually reflected her individual cultural values ("Introduction" 18). Warland states bluntly in her retrospective essay that,

[40] Daphne Marlatt Canada Council Exploration Program grant application, Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 2. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

"This commentary has been the hardest thing I have ever written" ("Where" 192).[41] In a letter from Marlatt to Maracle, written after an editing meeting that Maracle had been unable to attend, Marlatt writes that, "We seem to have, at least the 3 of us do, such different ideas of how to edit the discussions with the audience at the end of each panel."[42] When Marlatt wondered about Maracle's commitment to the editing collective, Maracle replied that, "I realize that you wanted to do the project collectively, but we likely have a different concept of just what the collective process is all about."[43] Working collaboratively seems to have been a challenge for each individual, who had divergent ideas on how to edit the proceedings, and on how to do so as a group. In a final report on the *Telling It* book project, Marlatt summed it up this way: "Putting this book together was not an easy task for any of us – it required much soul-searching and some difficult collective decisions."[44] Obviously, the editing collective persevered and the hard work of their collaboration is palpable not only through the archives of their editing process, but even in the text itself. In her review of the book printed in *Books in Canada*, Erin Moure says, "I felt the caring and thoughtfulness of the editing more strongly than the tensions of the actual event."

Enthusiasm for the successes of their collective work must be tempered by a strange silence manifest throughout the *Telling It* text. The original roster for the conference included eight creative writers, whereas only seven are evident in the text. In fact, an eighth

[41] She goes on to ask "Why? Primarily because I am writing beyond my own boundaries, beyond what I've said on paper before. There are other reasons. One is the fact that I am the only White woman writing a commentary and because of racism and the upheaval around lesbianism I have keenly felt my words being scrutinized. Throughout the course of many drafts I have received considerable feedback and criticism from the other editors. I have rewritten and rewritten this. Have said in my private, hopeless hours that I'm not going to participate in the commentaries – yet I know I must not censor myself" (192).

[42] Daphne Marlatt, letter to Lee Maracle, 17 November 1989, Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 7. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

[43] Lee Maracle, letter to Daphne Marlatt, undated, Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 7. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

[44] Daphne Marlatt, "Final Report on 'Telling It' Project," Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 2. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

author did indeed participate in the event, but she ultimately refused to be involved in the book project, and asked that her comments be removed from the published proceedings. In the section drawn from the first panel of the conference, a footnote refers to this absence.[45] The archives reveal this writer's official reason for pulling out of the project: "I don't feel ethically comfortable to collaborate myself as a writer in such a collection which might be indirectly discriminating against certain groups of women writers."[46] The statement is succinct and mysterious: which "groups of women writers" are potentially being discriminated against? Is she suggesting (like Eileen Manion in her book review of *Telling It*) that African-Canadian women writers should have been invited as well? In fact, despite her official statement, there are numerous hints in *Telling It* and in the archives that her reticence has its roots in a controversy that erupted during the first panel discussion, a controversy catalyzed by her own remarks. Although they could no longer publish what the eighth writer had said, the editing collective sought a way to "air the debate."[47] Hence, the eighth writer's comments are indicated by ellipses in the proceedings, while a footnote explains that she "questioned the inclusion of lesbian writers in the conference. She wondered how lesbians could constitute a culture since lesbians lack their own language" (44). The subsequent debate seems to have been one of the most salient and memorable moments of the conference, judging by the editors' insistence on including it, the space that it occupies in the three retrospective essays, and the fact that it seems to have driven the eighth writer away.

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[45] The footnote reads, "Editors' note: A fourth writer who participated on this panel has chosen not to have her talk included in this book" (TIBC "Panel One" 21).
[46] This statement, written by the author in question, can be found in the Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 7. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
[47] Daphne Marlatt, "Final Report on 'Telling It' Project," Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 2. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

How can we read the absent presence of this eighth author in light of the inclusive drive of anti-essentialist feminism? Is her withdrawal an example of a failure to connect across difference? Is she at fault for ultimately bowing out of the extended conversation? Or were her assertions too divergent, too potentially discriminatory, to figure in to the feminist bridge-building of *Telling It*? There are several ways to think about her silence. In their retrospective essays, Lee and Warland reproach the eighth writer for withdrawing, implying that her silence is a cowardly avoidance of potentially beneficial debate (Lee "Afterword" 188; Warland "Where" 192). For them, her silence is figured as reproachable absence, but it might also be read as a proactive choice on her part. In her final report on *Telling It*, Marlatt notes that this eighth writer "refused to give permission to include her statements and indeed asked that her presence be erased, on political grounds. This was difficult for us."[48] This description alludes to the power that the eighth writer wielded when she decided to withdraw. Writing on silence in postcolonial contexts, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan reminds us that,

> Silence, by the same token that regards speech as the expression of the self, may become a barrier to a knowledge of the self, to its penetration by a perceiver. When this happens, the operation of silence becomes an operation of power rather than powerlessness. Silence as withheld communication produces mystery and enigma; it expresses displeasure (87).

That is, the eighth writer's decision to disappear into silence may have been a calculated, self-preservative and powerful move on her part, meant to frustrate her angry interlocutors. Of course, another unfortunate rationale for her silence must also be admitted: she may have felt unheard, disrespected, and forced to withdraw. The questions then become: what does it mean for a self-identified feminist to choose *not* to participate in a cross-cultural

[48] Daphne Marlatt, "Final Report on 'Telling It' Project," Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 2. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

feminist dialogue? Or, what does it mean if a self-identified feminist is made to feel that she cannot participate? These are pertinent questions for feminist movements that value inclusion and respect difference. How wide is the bridge? And when is it appropriate to walk away – or to ask someone else to walk away? As Sky Lee asks in her retrospective essay, what happens to the anger occasioned by this rift (183-184)? Reading the silence of the eighth writer through the perspective proposed by Ien Ang would be one way to understand it, as Ang suggests that "moments of ultimate failure of communication should not be encountered with regret, but rather should be accepted as the starting point for a more modest feminism, one which is predicated on the fundamental *limits* to the very idea of sisterhood" (396-397).

The nature of this specific debate speaks to the collaborative issues at the heart of anti-essentialist, cross-cultural and transnational feminism. *Telling It* was born out of "a hope that our differences were not completely unbridgeable, that women with dissimilar, even unequal experiences of oppression, might be able to speak openly and hear each other openly, might even (and this was a wilder hope) find some sense of shared ground" (Marlatt "Introduction" 12-13). The eighth writer questioned the idea that "lesbian" constituted a category of women writers in the same way as "Asian" or "Native." Her interjection, therefore, speaks to the complex relationality (to borrow Mohanty's term (*Feminism* 13)) of sex, gender and race, as she struggles to understand their status in relation to one another. The responses to her interjection also grapple with these intersecting identity categories. For instance, Sky Lee's analysis of the situation is that the conference participants did not adequately express the anger that they felt toward the eighth writer because she was a woman of colour: "I do feel the lack of response-ability was

because she was a woman of colour, supposedly speaking from her culture, and no one wanted to risk being 'racist'" (Telling It 184). Lee Maracle writes bluntly about the same issue: "*Is Lesbian a Culture?* I wish the remark had come from a white woman. It would have been easier to dismiss it as homophobic, sexist nonsense" (166). Like Lee, Maracle suggests that the question of sexuality broached by the eighth writer is inseparable from questions of race; however, Maracle's comment is itself problematic in its construction of *a* knowable – and dismissable – "white woman." These comments, along with the eighth writer's own controversial assertions, attest to the complications of trans-cultural and transnational communication, when complex matrixes of identity categories are at stake.

Pauline Butling may have had this controversy in mind when she identified *Telling It* as the first Canadian literary conference to address the intersections of race, gender and sexuality (33). What the encounter demonstrates is the difficulties of discussing such intersectionalities. This realization – that transnational, cross-cultural, anti-essentialist and inclusive feminist dialogue can be extremely challenging – is one of the lessons to be gleaned from this conference and text. Sky Lee offers the compelling image of a "pain of glass" to evoke the barriers that separate people (Telling It 178-181). In Lee's extended metaphor, the pain/pane is so thick for some people that mutual recognition is rendered impossible; others, however, are pressed up against thinner glass, trying to communicate, while one woman is paralysed by the "shards of pain" she stands upon (179-181). There seems to be little hope that these people might emerge from their pane/pain, and this extended image thereby illustrates the impediments to respectful connection across differences.

Of course, *Telling It* is not only a site of frustrations and failed communication. To begin with, it succeeded in amassing a significant crowd of women interested in marginalized writers and anti-essentialist feminism.[49] Although Sky Lee argues that, "the format did nothing to challenge the status quo," the event was somewhat unique: organized within an academic context, the conference was meant to be non-academic and focused on communities (Telling It 12, 182). One of the Native participants commented that the conference was the first of its kind in Canada,[50] and Viola Thomas, writing in support of funding for the *Telling It* volume, stressed that such a publication would be long overdue in Canada.[51] The reviewers of the publication also identify a laudatory methodology that was espoused by the conference participants. That is, the reviewers comment on the intent *listening* that took place, and they suggest that *Telling It* teaches readers about the necessity of hard listening. In her critique "Language in Her Ear," Erin Moure compares *Telling It* to *Language in Her Eye*, a 1990 anthology of Canadian women writers reflecting on writing and gender. For Moure, the *listening* (emphasis hers) that is palpable in *Telling It* distinguishes it from the other book, and she identifies such *listening* as a strategy that resists suspicion, blockage, fear and refusals. In her review, Joanna Kafarowski also notes that *Telling It* considers "how a woman writer may listen and learn from other women writers." Even Eileen Manion, who claims that *Telling It* "makes no theoretical breakthroughs in the issue of differences among women," concedes that it is effective in

[49] In Marlatt's outline for her welcome speech at the beginning of the conference, she notes that the enrolment exceeded their expectations and they had had to adjust their room reservations to accommodate everyone. Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 4. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
[50] Daphne Marlatt "Simon Fraser University President's Research Grant Application" page 2, Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 1. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
[51] Viola Thomas, Letter of Appraisal for the Canada Council Explorations Program, Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 2. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

illustrating the principle of hard listening. In the final essay of the text, Betsy Warland discusses listening as a much-appreciated component of the *Telling It* experience and she credits the Native writers with bringing an emphasis on listening to the event (195-196). All of this praise could be tempered by admonitions such as Ien Ang's, who argues that the feminist faith in dialogue often naively assumes the possibilities of "open and honest communication to 'overcome' or 'settle' differences, of a power-free speech situation without interference by entrenched presumptions, sensitivities and preconceived ideas" (396). To remember both the commendable listening of *Telling It and* the strange silence of the eighth writer is to realize both the possibilities and vulnerabilities of cross-cultural feminist dialogue.

4. The Ethics and the Archives

I have argued that the feminist politics of *Telling It*, and of its era, play out in microcosm in the collaborative process that brought this oral event to its textual incarnation. I have also suggested that the silence of the eighth writer speaks to these feminist politics because her controversial intervention was directly related to issues of diversity between women, and also because her refusal to collaborate further dramatizes the difficulties of collaboration across differences. However, this argument requires addressing the complex ethical questions of my use of archival research. In her work on literary archives, Sara S. Hodson describes the difficulties of working with an author's papers, especially in light of the "competing ethics of providing access while protecting privacy" (131). Hodson states that literary archives present particular privacy-related challenges for

archivists and researchers because the author might be a rather high profile public figure, because the archive often contains personal letters and manuscripts, because copyright law can connect with issues of privacy, and because of the growing tendency to collect papers from authors who are still alive (138-148). One technique that archival libraries might utilise to manage these delicate issues of privacy is to accept fonds for which the donor (or another designated individual) decides, on a case-by-case basis, who will be granted access to their papers (Hodson 134). For instance, the Daphne Marlatt fonds at Library and Archives Canada is a restricted fonds, meaning that researchers must have Marlatt's permission before consulting her papers. Michael Ondaatje's and Jane Urquhart's fonds are similarly restricted, whereas others have no restrictions at all, or allow limited access to only certain documents within the archive.[52] Hodson is rather vehemently opposed to the strategy employed by Marlatt, Ondaatje, and Urquhart to manage their archives. She argues that "selective availability not only contravenes the ethic of free and unfettered access that remains a cornerstone of the archival profession in a democratic society, it can also lead to trouble for both the donor and the curator" (135). However, Hodson is also aware of the growing incentives for repositories to collect authors' papers in their lifetime, thereby increasing the number of authors who insist on actively participating in the management of their archives (146). Because this is the case for Marlatt, I was grateful when she granted me permission to consult her fonds, but the ethical considerations surrounding my subsequent use of that material alerted me to the complexities of issues of privacy and archives.

[52] Literary Archives. *Library and Archives Canada.* 12 May 2009. Web. 31 Oct. 2009.

Hodson emphasizes that the privacy issues of an archive's "third party" are often the most difficult and "worrisome" to resolve, and I found this to be true in the case of Marlatt's fonds (132). The most typical example of an archive's "third party" would be a correspondent whose letters are contained within an archive but who did not participate in the disposition of those materials, and who may not even know that their letters (or letters addressed to them) have been archived. For instance, I quoted above from correspondence between Marlatt and Maracle, Maracle being a "third party" of Marlatt's archive, where I read these letters. Of course the most conspicuous third party of Marlatt's archive is *Telling It*'s eighth writer. Because the archive contains complete transcripts of the recorded conference material, the eighth writer's identity is revealed, and her comments are recorded, along with subsequent correspondence concerning her withdrawal from the publication.[53] To supplement my readings of *Telling It*, I could therefore provide a much more detailed account of the controversy catalyzed by her remarks. Thus far, however, I have chosen to refer to her anonymously, and to quote only from one archival document penned by her: that is, her official reason for withdrawing from the project. Is this inconsistent with my decision to quote from Maracle's correspondence with Marlatt? By what criteria do I decide that Maracle's letter, and the eighth writer's official refusal, are not private enough to censor, although I do not quote from the eighth writer's other potentially very pertinent comments? Apart from laws related to copyright or restricted access, Hodson concludes that there are very few guidelines for curators and archivists faced with dilemmas of open access versus right to privacy (148). She laments the fact that

[53] The eighth writer's name and comments were blacked out on certain copies of the transcripts but because the censoring was inconsistent, and because the archives contain numerous copies of these transcripts, none of the information was successfully censored.

"There appear few even satisfactory guidelines for handling potentially sensitive letters and manuscripts" (148). In our Canadian context, Christl Verduyn's work on Marian Engel grapples with these same questions from the perspective of the literary scholar. "What to do," she asks, "when the interest of a person's private papers collides with her express wish that any attention directed toward her be placed on her published, public work?" (92). "How intimate is intimate?" and "How can one justify the intrusion?" (Verduyn 93; Joan Coldwell qtd. in Verduyn 93). Both Hodson, from the archivist's perspective, and Verduyn, from the researcher's perspective, acknowledge the difficulties of these questions, and they emphasize the uniqueness of the ethical gray areas arising from each individual archive (Hodson 148, Verduyn 100).

The particularities of the eighth writer as a third party of Marlatt's archive relate to the very themes and debates that occasioned her participation in the conference and her withdrawal from the project. Consider the common theme of "voice" running through the topics of the conference, the editing process, and the archival issues. *Telling It* was concerned with the voices that are not sufficiently heard within the feminist movement and within Canadian literature. Not only did Marlatt hope that *Telling It* would be a space where feminism's rift-lines would be examined ("Introduction" 12), but she also situated the conference in terms of Canadian publishing, arguing in a grant application that Native, Asian-American and lesbian writers were "just beginning to make their voices heard" in Canada.[54] The eighth writer pulled her voice out of the conversations following the conference, and the editing collective sought a way to reconstruct the essence of the controversial debate without being able to cite the instigating voice. These citations are

[54] Daphne Marlatt "Simon Fraser University President's Research Grant Application" page 3, Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 1. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

available in a restricted archive but only as a third party, meaning that the writer had no say (no voice) in the matter. Item C2 of the Association of Canadian Archivists' Code of Ethics states that archivists must "make every attempt possible to respect the privacy of the individuals who created or are the subjects of records, *especially those who had no voice in the disposition of the records*" (italics mine).[55] On the one hand, the discussions and presentations at *Telling It* are based on the premise that all voices need to be heard in a just public sphere or social movement. On the other hand, the eighth writer's withdrawal and the guidelines from the archivists' association, remind us of an individual's right to unconditional governance of her own voice. The difference between these two standpoints lies in the interplay between a speaker's intentions (does she want to speak?) and her access to dissemination (is she permitted to speak?).

There are also revealing parallels to be drawn between the positions of the Telling It Book Collective and scholars researching *Telling It*. Like the editing collective, I have tried to describe the stakes of the conference and to "air the debate" surrounding the eighth writer within the confines imposed by her withdrawal from the project. There is a desire to remain faithful to what actually transpired at the 1988 event and a palpable frustration at the limitations imposed. My discussion of the tension between open access and privacy rights implicitly suggests that the whole truth lies in the archive but that it cannot be legitimately disclosed. This suggestion, however, is properly nuanced in the words of Canadian life writing expert Marlene Kadar, who reminds scholars that the archive is always an "incomplete site…[P]art of what makes the archive a complex text is that it is a fragmentary piece of knowledge, or an unfixed and changing piece of knowledge" (115).

[55] *Code of Ethics*. The Association of Canadian Archivists 1995-2009. Web. 31 Oct. 2009.

An archive is incomplete in the sense that it is comprised of material selected by a donor or by circumstances of history, upon which an archivist has imposed a specific kind of order; it may be added to in the future, it may be fraudulent, and its formation and interpretation are most certainly influenced by social and cultural processes that determine value (Kadar 115; Cox 240-247). As researchers, however, it can be difficult to operate according to this nuanced concept of archival truth. When I presented some of my thoughts on *Telling It* at the ACCUTE conference in May 2009,[56] one enthusiastic commenter expressed disapproval, and even anger, over the fact that the eighth writer was impeding our potentially complete understanding of what happened at the conference. "Why should she keep us from knowledge?" was the sentiment. In response to this question, and in defense of my own choice to respect the eighth writer's silence, I turn to the strategy eventually adopted by the Telling It Book Collective. The book born out of the initial conference is "not so much a proceedings as it is the transformation of a conference… [The] commentaries open discussion into a context that is at once more analytical and more personal" (9).[57] The eighth writer does not keep us from understanding *Telling It*, nor is our task to recreate the absolute truth of that event, as if that were possible. Keeping in mind Kadar's point about the inconclusive nature of archives, and following the textual *Telling*

[56] The Association of Canadian College and University Teacher's of English's 2009 conference took place May 23-26 at Carleton University as part of the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences. I presented on a panel on "Women's Writing in Canada" co-organized by the Canadian Literature Centre and the Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures.

[57] One could certainly argue that all publications stemming from conferences are transformations of the original events. However, *Telling It* is notably self-conscious of its transformed status (note the sub-title "the transformation of a conference," and 10, 17) and does not profess to be a conference proceedings. In her introduction, Marlatt notes that the editing collective "decided that we would not attempt to edit a proceedings of the conference – or at least that the proceedings would be only partial. What we were most interested in doing was furthering the discussion of issues that were raised at the conference" (17). In the context of Canadian feminism, the 1983 Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots provides an interesting precedent here, as the conference spawned both an anthology and a proceedings, which might be read as different types of "transformations" (Dybikowski; West Coast). Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots also connects to *Telling It* thematically, as Marlatt acknowledges (15).

It's transformed, analytical, and personal angle, we can acknowledge *this* discussion of ethics, archives, voice, silence, feminism, and politics as another "transformation" of that initial (now inaccessible) moment.

In her afterword to *Working in Women's Archives*, Kadar lists "six operations" of women's archival research (116). One operation accomplished by such research is "the investigation… of how women's lives and works change how we think about reading" (116). Kadar adds that such research should contribute to "the continuing interrogation of 'women' as a fixed category of study in the academy" (117). In light of what the archives do and do not reveal, thinking through the process by which *Telling It* was transformed from a conference into a text contributes to both of these operations. It may "change how we think about reading" because it encourages us to consider how our positioning as critics parallels the standpoints of archivists or editors and it challenges us to articulate how archives can influence the way we read. It also reminds us to interrogate "women" as a fixed category because the process dramatizes the interpersonal diversity at the heart of a group of women striving to collaborate even as they acknowledge their profound differences. The withdrawal of the eighth writer might therefore offer an instance from which to consider the challenges of anti-essentialist feminism. From a critical perspective, a similar attitude would regard the silence of the eighth writer not as an unfortunate impediment to research but rather as an invitation to reflect on the subtexts and implications of that silence and to re-examine the assumptions of the critical drive for mastery over an object of knowledge. An uninhibited account of all that I read in Marlatt's archive might lend a sense of authoritative thoroughness to these reflections, and it would undoubtedly be informative and productive. However, grappling with the limitations placed on my research

has afforded an occasion to consider the processes of research and to recognize the politics of the themes of *Telling It* at work, as I bring issues of archival research to bear on this important discussion. Archives are complex sites of incompleteness and regimentation, and in the case of *Telling It*, dealing with those complexities contributes to a more thorough understanding of the politics of the research site, and encourages scholars to consider privacy restrictions not as hurdles to be overcome, but as invitations to re-think our own standing points.

Remembering *Telling It* in Context

According to a variety of assessments cited above from Pauline Butling, Viola Thomas, Erin Moure, and an unnamed Native participant, *Telling It* was unique in certain aspects of its content and execution. In a grant application completed prior to the conference, Marlatt specifically addresses its originality in the Canadian context: "Unlike the United States, which has a growing body of work by Native Indian, Asian-American and lesbian writers as well as a growing body of theory around that work, women Native writers in Canada are just beginning to make their voices heard, as are women Asian-Canadians, with the exception of Joy Kogawa whose novel *Obasan* received critical acclaim."[58] Here Marlatt suggests that the Canadian literary and theoretical trajectory of marginalised women writers differs from that in the United States, thereby implicitly situating *Telling It* as a potentially prescient and groundbreaking moment in Canada. However, Marlatt is also acutely aware of *Telling It* in relation to other contemporaneous

[58] Daphne Marlatt "Simon Fraser University President's Research Grant Application" page 3, Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 1. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

events in Canadian literary circles. It is timely not only in its originality, but also because it was very obviously grounded in the identity politics and literary happenings of its Canadian context. In fact, Marlatt situated *Telling It* by evoking the "discussion across the country in the feminist community and in the literary community about the effects of racism and homophobia on minority writers."[59] In her introduction to the *Telling It* volume, Marlatt contextualises *Telling It* by mentioning "*Some Events Behind This Conference*," including the 1983 Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots conference, the 1988 International Feminist Book Fair, the appropriation of voice controversy among members of the Writers' Union of Canada, and the emerging voices of lesbian feminists within the feminist movement and academia (15-17). Like *Telling It* and *Tessera*, moments such as these might figure on a Canadian timeline of anti-essentialist feminism at work in literary circles. They each engage with the implications of realizing the heterogeneity of subjectivity and "dealing" with difference.[60]

The Third International Feminist Book Fair, which took place in Montreal in 1988 (a few months before the *Telling It* conference), has been commemorated as "a watershed in Canadian feminist cultural politics" (Emberley 79). In fact, the 1983 Women and Words/Les Femmes et les mots conference was probably the first Canadian women's literary conference to openly address racism, when writers such as Jeanette Armstrong, Lillian Allen, and Makeda Silvera spoke out about the their experiences of being women

[59] Daphne Marlatt "Simon Fraser University President's Research Grant Application" page 2, Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 1. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

[60] Marlatt might certainly have mentioned a few additional Canadian literary moments that situate *Telling It*, which I discuss in my first chapter. For instance, 1985 saw the publication of *In the Feminine*, the conference proceedings from *Women and Words / Les Femmes et les mots*, which, like *Telling It*, was edited by a women's collective (Dybikowski et al.). *A/Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, was published in 1986, and includes pieces by Barbara Godard on "the literary production of native women" and Claire Harris on the marginalization of black writers in Canada. These topics resonate with the discussions of *Telling It*.

writers of colour (Telling It 15-16; Butling 24-25). The Third International Feminist Book Fair (TIFBF), however, seems to have been more memorable for the controversies it prompted. Issues of racism and discrimination were at the centre of these controversies. At the TIFBF, Native and Métis women activists, poets, critics, writers challenged the biased assumptions of feminist theory, and the discrimination evident in the planning and the programme of the event (Emberley 80; Telling It 16). On the one hand, the TIFBF was a unifying space for women, and provided a venue for possibly the largest reading of Native North American women writers of its day (Telling It 16). Native writer Jeannette Armstrong remembers that, "it was a wonderful experience to realize that we weren't alone in our separate corners working" (Williamson 10). But as much as TIFBF was about networking and common ground, it was also about recognizing and "experiencing" differences (Anderson 128). During a particularly memorable moment at the book fair, Lee Maracle asked writer Anne Cameron to abstain from portraying Native culture in her books. This moment is historically accessible from a number of different perspectives: Marlatt recounts their confrontation in her introduction to *Telling It* (16), Lee Maracle and Claire Harris discuss it in interviews with Janice Williamson (Williamson 118, 169), Anne Cameron presents her side of the story in a piece in *Language in Her Eye* (67-68), and Julia Emberley theorizes it in her *Thresholds of Difference: Feminist Critique, Native Women's Writings, Postcolonial Theory* (94-96). The encounter between Maracle and Cameron can be read in light of the debates about literary appropriation and racism in publishing that were prevalent in the Canadian literary scene of the 1980s.[61] Such debates caused great

[61] A few years later, the controversy surrounding the 1994 Writing Thru Race conference brought similar debates to the foreground of Canadian cultural and political discussion. Controversy arose from the fact that the federal government was funding a conference which limited enrolment to writers of colour and First Nations writers. The conference is remembered as "a benchmark event, marking the culmination of more than a decade of literary/social activism aimed at redressing systemic racism and, for the first time, bringing

controversy at the Writers' Union of Canada (Marlatt "Introduction" 16) and divided the employees of Women's Press in Toronto (Williamson xvii, 288; Stasiulis). Marlatt places *Telling It* in the midst of these conversations: "this book comes at a crucial time, given the controversy emerging from the recent split in The Women's Press, Toronto, over the issue of racism in writing and publishing as raised by Native writers at the Third International Feminist Book Fair in Montreal in the summer of 1988."[62]

Other literary moments from 1988 also signal Canadian women's literature's growing engagement with issues of anti-essentialism and difference. For instance, it was in 1988 that Marlene Nourbese Philip won the Casa de Las Americas prize for the manuscript version of her poetry collection *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. This collection addresses issues of racism in Canada, by commenting on an African exhibit hosted by the Art Gallery of Ontario, for example (48-49). In the introduction to the published version of the collection, Philip reflects on the place of the writer in colonial and postcolonial Canada, especially in terms of language (12). Likewise in 1988, some articles in the literary feminist journal *Fireweed* specifically tackled subjects related to anti-essentialist and transnational feminism, as in Dionne Brand's article on Black women's labour and racially constructed gender roles, or Makeda Silvera's interview with Palestinian activist Rana Nashashibi. That same year, Write-on Press published the first edition of Lee Maracle's *I am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism*, which includes sections dealing specifically with divisions between women arising from homophobia and colonialism (for instance, in chapters 2, 3, and 17). This partial profile of Canadian literary

together writers of colour and First Nations writers to talk about shared concerns" (Butling 26). Numerous authors have commented on Writing Thru Race: see, for example, Roy Miki's *Broken Entries* and Althea Prince's *Being Black*, as well as Robinder Kauv Sehdev's MA thesis.

[62] Daphne Marlatt Canada Council Exploration Program grant application, Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1993-13 Box 21 f. 2. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

happenings of 1988,[63] like my detailed case study of *Telling It*, is not meant to imply that certain themes and concerns were not exhibited earlier in Canadian women's writing, or that these particular events and publications have been forgotten. However, I contend that they can be revisited and illuminated when read in light of the larger issues of Western feminism, particularly in regards to difference. There is a genealogy here, waiting to be acknowledged, and Canadian women's literature, while recognizing the influence and importance of the seminal contributions of Lorde, Anzaldua, et al., can also look to its own reference points to understand the development of contemporary Western feminist theory in our midst.

Such a project historicizes Canadian women's writing, but it can also extend its relevance into the present day by reading it in light of globalization and twenty-first century transnational feminism. As suggested through my overview of anti-essentialism in contemporary Western feminism and in my analyses of *Tessera*, those feminists who work against exclusions within a national feminist movement and those who denounce the neo-imperialism of some inter-national feminist work are all interpreting in light of the same general realizations: that women's subjectivities are complexly constituted (and the oppression they may experience is therefore not only a result of sexism), and that women

[63] Nineteen eighty-eight also saw the publication of *La Théorie, un dimanche*. At first glance, *La Théorie, un dimanche* might seem ill-fitted to the genealogy I am proposing here. It might be seen as too theoretical, too language-focused to be addressing issues of racism and difference, *as per* the dichotomous relationship often perceived between "French feminism" and "Anglo-American feminism." However, there are aspects of the *La Théorie, un dimanche* collective that can indeed be read in light of the story of North American anti-essentialist feminism, such as Louise Dupré's contribution, in which she speculates on the relationship between women, feminism, and difference (127). I wonder whether the perceived split between language-focused Québécoises writers and feminist writers in Anglophone Canada can be read in light of the "French feminism" versus "Anglo-American feminism" debates of the 1980s and 1990s, and whether figures such as Marlatt and Warland might be seen as bridging that supposed gap insofar as they were greatly influenced by the work of Nicole Brossard, very language-focused in their own poetics, but also very active in addressing homophobia within the women's movement, thereby exhibiting the kind of practical politics more readily associated with "Anglo-American feminism." I touch on some of these ideas in my first chapter's discussion of *Tessera*.

themselves are complexly connected with each other (historically, through transnational flows of capital, etc.). The cross-communal conversations of *Telling It*, therefore, connect to issues of transnational feminist theory. Many of the issues debated during the conference and through the editing collective are indispensable to transnational feminist thought. As discussed above, the participants have much to say about difference, racism, and homophobia within feminist movements, and they also grapple with the legacies of colonization as a women's issue. Insofar as they are ultimately debating the politics of identity and representation, they are engaging in one of the primary discussions of transnational feminism. Indeed, "encounters between transnational feminists of the North and South over the past four decades have been marked by recurrent contestation over the politics of representation" (Hawkesworth "When" 17). Linking *Telling It* to transnational feminism is ultimately possible because the transnational is always inevitably mediated through, and manifest in, the local. There is no pure outside space beyond nations where transnational feminists meet; there are only local spaces where women seek to collaborate across differences and beyond what triumphalist globalization or national agendas would dictate. The evocation of globalization makes sense as well, given the extent to which the *Telling It* discussion addresses cross-community communication in multi-cultural Canada, which has been constituted through global movement, immigration and colonization.

In the epigraph heading this chapter, Daphne Marlatt expresses her hope that a feminist "we" still might exist, and that its constituents might work for change across their differences. The existence of the feminist "we" might have seemed uncertain at the time, given the strength of anti-essentialist critiques of the Western feminist movement that exposed its racism, homophobia, and neo-imperialism. Periodic declarations of a post-

feminist world certainly keep us wondering about the state of the feminist "we" even today.[64] *Telling It* is one instance from the recent history of Canadian women's writing that testifies to the desire to revitalize the feminist "we" by connecting across difference; it also reveals the difficulties of doing so. The work of this chapter has been to contextualise those desires and difficulties, and to establish connections between *Telling It* and other moments in the history of Canadian women's writing, and between *Telling It* and feminist theorizing across national borders. As such, it is ultimately concerned with the pluralizing of feminism and the Canadian literary voices that have intervened in that process.

[64] I am reminded of the popular pithy rebuke to declarations about the end of feminism: "I'll be a post-feminist in a post-patriarchy."

Chapter Three :

Complicity, Globalization and the Ghostly Colonial: Daphne Marlatt's "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts"

"History is not the dead and gone; it lives on in us in the way it shapes our thought and especially our thought about what is possible."
– Daphne Marlatt, "Self-Respresentation and Fictionalysis" (125)

"[T]he work of constructing new narrativizations of what is taken to be truth – in other words, history – can be helped by what is taken to be the field of nothing but narrative. Fiction-making can become an ally of history when it is understood that history is a very strong fictioning."
– Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Bonding in Difference" (28)

Situating "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts"

Ten years before Marlatt initiated *Telling It*'s public discussion on "women and language across cultures," she explored similar themes through an autobiographical mode in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" (1979). The text is comprised of narrative segments, photographs, journal entries, letters and poems that emerged out of a trip Marlatt took in 1976 to visit her childhood home in Penang. As such, Michael Ondaatje classifies it as part of her "voyages" series, which also includes *Zócalo* and *How Hug a Stone*; indeed, the three texts were eventually published in one volume as *Ghost Works* in 1993.[65] Insofar as "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" is a travel narrative, purposefully engaging with a

[65] Ondaatje's comment is recorded on the back cover of Marlatt's *How Hug a Stone*. All references to "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" use the pagination from the original publication in *The Capilano Review*.

specific locale, it can be read for its focus on place, which has long been recognized as a crucial element of Marlatt's work.[66] "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" also exhibits Marlatt's longstanding attention to the complexity of gender, here entwined with a particular perspective on her geographical setting, as the narrator wonders about different manifestations of womanhood in a site replete with colonial legacies.[67] Her mother, the *memsahib* of "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," is increasingly present in the text, as are the servants that acted as supplementary mothers during the narrator's childhood, and encounters with these characters lead the narrator to reflect on the nature of complicity. Overall, the principal themes of this relatively early piece are those that infuse Marlatt's entire *oeuvre*. These subjects – place, gender, motherhood, colonialism – are indeed prominent in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts;" in this chapter, however, I examine them in a new light by thinking about how Marlatt's approaches relate to transnational feminism and globalization. How does she portray the presence of both the colonial past and the global present in a particular locale? As a visitor from "the West," how is her attention to place an extension of the anti-colonialism she strives to cultivate? Do her class discomfort

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[66] Given the hybrid nature of travel writing (Borm 13), a travel narrative is never *only* a travel narrative but also participates in life writing, and potentially in a variety of other genres. Borm defines a travel book as "any narrative characterized by a non-fiction dominant that relates (almost always) in the first person a journey or journeys that the reader supposes to have taken place in reality while assuming or presupposing that author, narrator and principal character are but one or identical" (17). As I will explain below in greater detail, "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" has a definite non-fiction element, and it also employs first person narration to recount a journey. While I am hesitant to conclude that "author, narrator and principal character are but one" (see footnote 3), it does have autobiographical roots which are represented in part through travel writing.

[67] Although "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" is a highly autobiographical text, I have chosen to refer to the "narrator" of the text as distinct from Marlatt, the author of the text. It would be presumptuous and unrealistic to assume an exact correlation between the narrator and the author, and would deflect from the fact that the author has carefully crafted her presentation of "herself" (the narrator) in the text, no matter how much it remains rooted in actual experience. "Although my work is, to a large extent, autobiographical, i'd never thought of my books as autobiography," writes Marlatt, "Perhaps because i came to writing through poetry and fiction. No matter how autobiographically based a piece of fiction is, it uses the mask of an other, even as tenuous an other as an unnamed narrator" (*Readings* 200).

and her malaise with the *memsahib* legacy exemplify the need for women in positions of power to examine their own complicity in oppression, as many transnational feminists recommend? How do her attempts to empathize with differently-positioned women relate to contemporary feminist theorizing about the need for solidarity across difference?

In a letter to her sister Lucille in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," the narrator calls the trip to Penang "a curious psychic re-dipping in the old font" (62), indicating that to be back in her childhood surroundings means an eerie revisiting of the past.[68] The inclusion of caption-less childhood photographs and the stream-of-consciousness narration of memories from her early years (in sections AS A CUP FILLS ITSELF IN THE STREAM and THE LINE) give the impression that the past is being evoked alongside the present.[69] Rather than a simple, chronological past/present dichotomy, the narrator's childhood and the present trip are interconnected and echoing. The undermining of a linear past/present binary is implicit on the first page of the text, in the epigraph from Gertrude Stein: "We cannot retrace our steps, going forward may be the same as going backwards" (45). As the narrator sees her past mirrored in the present, and as she experiences the repercussions of her family history on her contemporary travels, she is grappling with the interconnectivity of the colonial, the postcolonial, and the global, and wondering how to acknowledge the

[68] From a letter in her archives: "made a voyage, took a trip, back, to the place i was raised in (that tug, at the roots of my hair) & it was all still there, summer of '76, like some photograph iwalked back into. Penang, Malaysia." Letter dated 16 November 1976. Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1985-8 Box 27. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

[69] Marlatt's inclusion of photographs resonates in her Canadian context. In her study of photography in the works of Alice Munro, Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje, and Margaret Laurence, Lorraine M. York notes many additional Canadian writers who incorporate photography into their literary works (18). Manina Jones has also written on the inclusion of photographs and photographic metaphors in Canadian literature. In *That Art of Difference: "Documentary-Collage" and English-Canadian Fiction*, Jones links the phenomenon to the long-standing documentary tradition in Canadian letters, as first identified by Dorothy Livesay, and then by Stephen Scobie, among others (Jones 3-7, 74-76). Concerning the photographs in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," it is important to note that while the photos appeared in the original publication of the text in *The Capilano Review*, they were omitted from the *Ghost Works* edition.

strengths and the ambiguities of her personal history, while denying its determinism. As she does so, Marlatt (and/or her narrator) must think through her complex connections with other women (specifically her mother and her caretaker) in modes that resonate with contemporary theories of transnational feminisms. Thinking about one's complicity in the oppression of others is a foundational notion for many transnational feminists, and this is what Marlatt's narrator must do as she reflects on the past in the present.

There are (at least) four intersecting contexts that are at stake in the discussion of place that follows these introductory remarks. Marlatt's narrator engages with the places she inhabits and the places she remembers. When I evaluate her interaction with the spaces she occupies, I am aware that places are perceived differently by different people at different times; places are, in other words, always in flux.[70] Being attentive to the contexts in which Marlatt addresses issues of place will situate her portrayal thereof, so as to avoid discussing place as if it were a given, easily-defined concept. As mentioned above, Marlatt's engagement with place in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" can first be read in the context of Canadian literature, as this text partakes of the long poem and documentary traditions in Canadian letters, but especially as it reflects Marlatt's involvement in the poetry scene of 1960s Vancouver. Second, the importance of place in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" can be read in light of colonial discourse analysis. Throughout the work, Marlatt's narrator diagnoses a colonial mentality that disgusts her and that she describes as the colonizers' arrogant denial of the reality of their immediate surroundings. As I discuss

[70] By stating that places are in flux and are perceived differently, I am signalling an awareness of a troubling tendency that Doreen Massey calls "a background motif that is unquestioning about the nature of 'places,' which holds – probably implicitly – to a notion of essential places" even in the midst of debate "about globalization, about migration and cultural shifts, about the reorganization of time and space" (111).

in greater detail below, this mentality connects with work done by Mary Louise Pratt (among others) on the tropes of colonial travel writing. Third, place can be thought of in the context of globalization studies that interrogate the global/local binary and the dynamics of global mobility today. Elements of Marlatt's text speak to these debates as she recognizes manifestations of globalization in Penang as well as their colonial roots. Colonial history, as it bleeds into the present global moment, may indeed be one of the "hungry ghosts" of Marlatt's text because of its shadowy yet consuming presence during the narrator's trip. Fourth, Marlatt's focus on place can be read in the context of transnational feminist discourses that have employed metaphors of place and space to depict their ideologies. The section of this chapter that outlines Marlatt's engagement with place is alert to these four interconnected contexts, ultimately arguing that Marlatt's focus on place is anti-colonial, aware of the present global moment, and in tune with the productive spatial metaphors of contemporary feminist theory.

For the narrator of "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," one of the key sites of Penang is the house where she spent part of her childhood, and where she now lives as a guest. Michèle Gunderson reads "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" in light of Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's article on feminist politics and the concept of "home." Home is indeed a crucial theme of Marlatt's text; however, she explores the ideological baggage of her "home" through descriptions of the literal house, providing another instance of her attention to place and space. My observations about her evocation of this domestic space will lead into the two middle sections of this chapter that will deal with the figure of the mother, and then the servant, Eng Kim, that acted as an "other mother" to the narrator

during her childhood. The narrator's relationships with the mothers in her life are fraught with ambiguity. As she remembers her mother as *memsahib*, she confronts the gendered legacies of colonialism and rejects that role, yet she also realizes the contradictory nature of her mother's position and sees her as sometimes victim, sometimes healer. In refusing to be the household manager, the narrator hopes for a more open relationship with the servants. However, she finds it difficult to concretise her desire to connect with Eng Kim, her former caretaker. While she is attracted to greater community and commonality, she also encounters the difficulties of expressing empathy across difference and of moving beyond the roles scripted for her and for Eng Kim by their classes and personal histories. Historical legacies, carried over from a colonial period into a contemporary global moment, inform the relationships that the narrator experiences with her mothers. As she confronts her own complicity and recognizes that her privilege enables even her presence in Penang as an visitor from Canada, her observations echo transnational feminist discussions.

The overall aim of this chapter is to trace the links between Marlatt's narrative strategies, her narrator's reflections, and transnational feminist theories, as such theories exist under present-day globalization and are haunted by colonial histories. Complicity is a crucial concept in this chapter because it is of central concern to Marlatt's narrator, and also because it is pivotal to the history and practice of transnational feminisms. "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" is a multi-genre piece, partaking of autobiography, biotext, and travelogue, as well as incorporating other art forms through the inclusion of photographs and the repeated use of theatrical metaphors. This composite form can be seen as an instance of the kind of creative methodology needed to create solidarity across difference for women

willing to explore their complex connections. That is, in a collage of different genres and tones, Marlatt presents a series of transnational feminist strategies for grappling with situatedness, complicity and the potential for feminist solidarity. Marlatt connects her thematic concerns with her style when she comments that she is interested in "focussing the immediate, shifting the experience of distance and dislocation through the use of montage, juxtaposition, superimposing disparate and specific images from several tones and places" (*Readings* 24). The blurring of genres is, for Marlatt, a quintessential strategy of women's writing (*Readings* 208). Within and through such a composite form as "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," Marlatt's narrator is engaging with the legacy of her personal history, thinking about the gendered effects of colonialism, and facing her own complicity. All of these issues are necessary to discussions of transnational feminisms, and without reading "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" as a manual or exemplary guidebook, I do suggest that there are anti-colonial, justice-affirming strategies at work in the text. Ultimately, "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" is aligned with transnational feminist theories that encourage women to engage with place, acknowledge complicity and discomfort, cultivate healthy empathy, confront history, identify colonial mindsets, and nurture creative methodologies. These are the themes that I hope to access through a particular focus on the text's depictions of the narrator's mother, Eng Kim, the colonial house, and its surroundings.

Place and Private Hedges

Daphne Marlatt describes herself as having "come into writing" in 1960s Vancouver, in association with the TISH group, whose poetics of place corresponded with her desire to write about Vancouver (Kossew 52).[71] Pauline Butling describes the TISH group as "several young poets […] writing about place, landscape, the local, the city, the region, and the nation in an attempt to locate the I/eye of the poet within its social, discursive, and historical constructions" (89). Butling evokes Mary Louise Pratt's analyses of colonial travel writing to argue that TISH's language-centered focus on place incarnated their anti-imperial poetics (90). Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* focuses on specific texts written in various historical times and settings through which she presents the diversity and shifts within the colonial travelogue genre. However, there are recurring tropes in the documents she examines, one of which she calls the "monarch-of-all-I-survey" scenes (201). Butling argues that the TISH poets were undermining the "monarch-of-all-I-survey" attitude by personalizing the lyric and working toward "an articulation of place within a polysemic linguistic field" (91). Frank M. Tierney and Angela Robbeson also identify TISH as anti-colonial; they write that with the advent of TISH the Canadian long poem was oriented toward "contestations of the colonizing project from a countercultural standpoint" (17).[72] Butling offers Marlatt's *Vancouver Poems* as one

[71] In his introduction to Marlatt's *Net Work: Selected Writing*, Fred Wah reports that while Marlatt was not part of the original TISH group (that included Frank Davey, George Bowering, Fred Wah, David Dawson, Jamie Reid, Lionel Kearns), she was involved (along with Bob Hogg, Dave Cull, Gladys Hindmarch, Peter Auxier, Dan McLeod) with the second generation who continued TISH after the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference (8).

[72] Tierney and Robbeson go on to note that while the politics of the TISH-era long poem may have been marginal or radical in their era, the Canadian contestatory long poem has since been thoroughly

example of an anti-imperial, place-based poetics. It is as pertinent, and perhaps more fitting, to read "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" alongside Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*, considering that Pratt's intention in her book is to ask how travel has produced "the rest of the world" in the eyes of "the West" (5). Like Butling, who connects Marlatt's prioritization of the local to Pratt's study of travelogues, I believe that Marlatt's evocation of place does relate to colonial discourse analysis. In "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," the narrator pursues an anti-colonial engagement with place that is in opposition to what she sees as a colonial non-engagement with place. After explaining how this dynamic is played out in the text, I will suggest that it relates to debates about globalization and opens doors for transnational feminisms. Pratt points out, the "monarch-of-all-I-survey" scene is usually gendered in interesting ways (201, 213); gender is also of primary importance in Marlatt's attempt to undermine this colonial trope.

Throughout "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," the narrator faults some British residents in Penang for ignoring their surroundings and for denying the reality of their setting. In a letter to her sister she defines this stance as "a colonialist attitude, that defensive set against what immediately surrounds as real on its own terms – because to take it on as real would mean to 'go native' & that was unthinkable to them" (62). Ignoring the bountiful fresh local produce is a primary example of this mind-set. The narrator remembers her mother "ordering apples, *not* pisang mas, *not* rambitans" (81). The italics in

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institutionalized in academia "by a process that, to a remarkable degree, replicates in the academic sphere the colonial and colonizing activity of establishing a node of power" (18). While this thesis may be seen as contributing to that process, I also show how Marlatt's interventions connect with contemporary transnational feminisms that propose strategies which may still be read as radical. It is also important to note that while Butling, Tierney and Robbeson focus on TISH poetics as anti-colonial, other critics have emphasized the opposite, such as Keith Richardson who sees TISH as evidence of American colonization in Canada (Richardson 13).

this phrase are revelatory: not only do they emphasise the incongruity of ordering apples *instead of* local fruit, but they also reverse the usual convention of italicising "foreign" words or phrases. Here, it is the refusal of local food that is italicised rather than the non-English words, which upsets the binary of domestic / dominant (usually not italicised) and foreign / dominated (usually italicised). In the present-day of the narrative, it is Mr. Y (who lives in their childhood home and is now their host) who ignores aspects of his surroundings. The narrator marvels that "for all the years that Mr. Y's been here he knows almost nothing about what surrounds him, what the trees or birds are, what the fruits are – he doesn't like native food, exists on a kind of dilute European diet that includes lots of canned food" (69-70). The narrator uses the phrase "private hedges of the mind" (70) to describe his outlook, and it echoes a parallel phrase used earlier in the same paragraph: "colonial empire of the mind" (69).[73] Clearly, the narrator diagnoses a colonial mentality as one that blocks out entire elements of its geographical setting, as with "private hedges" (70). The use of the word "private" in this phrase, as opposed to public or communal, is important to Marlatt's diagnosis. The colonial attitude blocks out its surroundings with hedges that are private property, alluding to their class status as landowners and to their unwillingness to enter into relationships in the public space of the local community.

Although Marlatt denounces this "private hedges" mentality throughout "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," the figures of colonial power in the text do not always subscribe

[73] Both of these phrases evoke the idea of "decolonizing the mind" as explored by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his book of the same name. While his book is particularly concerned with the decolonization of African cultural expression (especially in terms of language), the "mind" that interests Marlatt at this point in her text is that of the colonizer. The discomfort that I feel connecting her phrase with Ngugi's foreshadows my critique below of the victim stance that Marlatt's narrator sometimes assumes in her depictions of colonization. (It is also worth noting that in addition to Ngugi's seminal work, the phrase "decolonizing the mind" is widely used in other contexts of postcolonial scholarship.)

to it. Her own father, for example, asserts that he has always felt at home in Penang, "loves the smell of camphorwood chests, the songs of birds, the plants" (63). She also meets "a fine old English couple," who have been living in Malaysia for fifty years, and who "seem to be more in touch with the land & the people than anyone else we've met" (60-61). In fact, the narrator declares that they "really do represent the moral best of the old system" (61). In her eyes, this couple, and her father, have been able to look beyond the "private hedges," despite their positioning in a colonial and postcolonial setting. However, there is ambiguity even in her portrayals of these particular characters. The narrator asks her father if he has ever felt "alien" or unwelcome in Penang. As well as admitting that the current political situation makes him feel uneasy, he remembers encountering some animosity in a temple where he tried to film the Typoosum rites. He ends the story by telling her that "he's never liked Indian temples anyhow" (63). Gunderson reads this as his expression of freedom and detachment (77) but I sense his defensiveness in this statement. He does not acknowledge the right of the temple-goers to object to his filming; rather, he belittles their capacity to refuse his gaze by asserting that he was not ever really very interested anyway. Marlatt opens the subsequent paragraph with the fragment, "What we make our own – or separate from us" (63), which implies that her father has established his own self-protective boundaries based on inclusion / exclusion. She is not overtly accusatory toward his mentality. However, when she encounters a parallel situation (pointing her camera at a woman at a banana seller's stall), she acknowledges the woman's "outrage" and says that through the experience she has "learned something about dignity" (76).

The larger description of the "fine old English couple" is similarly tempered. They are respected by the workers on their estate, speak Malay and Tamil fluently, are empathetic to their surroundings, and "don't seem to close off from any of it" (60-61). In these respects, they contrast starkly with the "ghosts," those who "speak of 'going home,' to England or anywhere […] They haunt the place (a kind of addiction)" and constitute one of the referents for the title of this text (77). Yet the narrator does identify the "fine old English couple" as still being "very committed to a paternalistic system" (61). Her meeting with them is described first in the poem "planters" (59) and then in the entry dated "Friday July 30th" (60-61). Her discomfort with their involvement in a paternalistic system is much more evident in the imagery of the poem, in which the trees that they tap for latex are paralleled with the women who work on the estate. The poem highlights the aspects of her conversation with the planters that the narrator found particularly questionable: "even the women drive now" and "his people" are in quotation marks to highlight their offensiveness. There is a measure of admiration for the longevity of their commitment to their work and to their workers, but the overall effect is ambiguous. For instance, the images of space and movement in the poem are twofold. There are images of downward movement (dripping latex, climbing down hillsides) juxtaposed with images of upward movement (children climbing the drive, trees standing tall), which could be read as an allusion to hierarchical binaries of up / down, superior / inferior. However, they could also be read in an opposite mode, as references to a potential meeting place between that which moves down and that which climbs up. So while the narrator diagnoses a "colonial empire of the mind" that constructs "private hedges" to ignore the reality of its surroundings, there may be only

partial subscription to this attitude, blurring any simplistic colonized/colonizer categories. Marlatt's narrator acknowledges the ambiguities of these categories, just as she seeks to understand her own slippery positioning and the variety of reactions she has in response to her positioning in Penang.

Immediately following the two sections devoted to the "fine old English couple," separated only by three asterisks, is a short paragraph listing "palms so far" (61). The narrator lists the types of palm trees that she has seen on her trip, and then refers to the palms of the hands of a man who cuts a coconut down for them. Marlatt periodically includes sections such as the one that list elements of her natural surroundings, to portray her narrator's purposeful engagement with place, in opposition to the "private hedges" non-engagement of some residents. In an earlier section, the narrator lists the fish and the fruit that she has seen at the market (53), and her careful cataloguing of the produce contrasts with Mr. Y's ignorance of Malaysian fruit and with her mother's procuring of apples "*not* pisang mas, *not* rambitans" (81). The narrator also documents the flowers and insects ("so much life here not even the walls are still") that she encounters (67). She observes elements of her surrounding environment and notes them down in order to intentionally deny the colonial "private hedges" mentality that she has witnessed. Yet from a historical perspective, her strategy might be seen as fraught, given the long-standing connection between natural history and colonial conquest. In her section on "Science and Sentiment, 1750-1800", Mary Louise Pratt describes the rise of the Linnaean system of natural classification and its close ties with colonial travel.[74] She examines two travel narratives

[74] The connection between travel writing and colonial discourse has been the subject of numerous critical studies. Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan argue, through their use of Renato Rosaldo's concept of "imperialist nostalgia," that there remains a strong connection between empire and contemporary travel

organised around Linnaean classification and notes that the naturalists present themselves as innocent and focused uniquely on the scientific observation of nature in order to escape the guilt of involvement in conquest (57). While the study of nature masqueraded as an objective science separate from power-hungry governments, in reality naturalists were complicit in the colonial mission of imposing "order" and dominating a variety of environments. For example, Amanda Gilroy observes that the texts of Romantic-era naturalists Johann Forster and Anders Sparrman contain "conflicting ethnological discourses that framed European fascination with the exotic topography and racial others of the South seas" (2). Behind the eighteenth-century aesthetic of the "picturesque," with its faith in disinterested, unmediated contemplation, descriptions of nature were constructing and reinforcing imperial outlooks.[75]

Granted, Gilroy's research, as well as Pratt's, is temporally and geographically distanced from the twentieth-century Penang that Marlatt is observing; however, we can still wonder whether this element of colonial history (that is, naturalism's complicity with colonialism) taints the attempts of Marlatt's narrator to deny the colonizing influences in her life by engaging with nature. Although this is a danger, the narrator's decidedly anti-ethnographic mode (among the photographs, there are none of Penang residents other than her family), her acknowledgement of her complicity and situatedness, and her focus on her personal history and reflections confirm her engagement with place as an attempt at anti-

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literature. In their discussion of the relationship between travel writing and colonial discourse, they refer readers to Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*, and also to the works of Dennis Porter, Sara Mills, David Spurr, Inderpal Grewal, and Steve Clark (see Holland and Huggan 140-141).

[75] I have chosen to think through the narrator's engagement with place primarily in terms of colonial discourse analysis. It would also be interesting to think about how the matrix of nature, colonialism and postcoloniality in this text compares to similar matrixes in other Canadian literary texts, such as Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*.

colonialism. Pratt mentions that arrival scenes in travel literature can be very revealing and the trope she identifies is decidedly unlike the arrival scene in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," suggesting that Marlatt's narrator is attempting an atypical attitude toward her surroundings. Pratt describes a recurrent scene in some postcolonial travel literature in which the protagonist or autobiographer surveys their new surroundings from a hotel balcony, either condemning, trivializing, or disassociating from what they observe (216-217). The arrival scene in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" does not fall into this pattern. Describing her flight into Georgetown, the narrator observes the landscape and the city, and, rather than disassociating, she immediately recognises her personal stake in this place: "We came down from such a high altitude so fast the pain in my ears brought tears: the cost of re-entry? into the past?" (52). This sets the tone for the personal narrative that follows. The narrator engages with her surroundings because she disagrees with the "private hedges" mentality that is a part of her own family and class ("I want to rip out of myself all the colonialisms, the taint of colonial sets of mind" 62). But rather than claiming innocence by focusing on nature, she is led to ponder the very particular personal meanings that this place has for her and at her best she engages with it in terms of memory and sensuality, with no pretences to objectivity or impartial knowledge. This is an important stance given the problematic way that places are often assumed to be fixed, with a single "past" (Massey 113, 116). The long list of experiences that Marlatt's narrative has had in Penang all begin with the humble lower-case "i" and describe how she has perceived Penang through her own senses (i've drunk, i've eaten, i've heard, i've smelt, etc. 76). She announces this list as "odd notes retrieved from the unreal" (75), referring not to the colonial denial of their

surroundings as real (62), but rather to her personal experience of this place as unreal in its "strange conjunctions of past & present" (75) and in her own travel-related interrogation of how the diverse places in her life can be real simultaneously (74).[76]

I have been arguing that the narrator's anti-colonial attention to her immediate environment is not necessarily tainted by naturalism's historical associations with colonization, given the specificities of her strategies. However, there remains a disconcerting element in her adamant rejections of the colonialism she has been taught. For example, in the above quote, ("I want to rip out of myself all the colonialisms, the taint of colonial sets of mind" 62), her rhetoric implies that she has been imposed upon, conditioned, even victimised by colonialisms. The forcefulness of her language expresses her frustration, and she comes close to suggesting that she has been a victim of colonisation and that her mind has been colonised by its influence. The violent imagery of the verb "rip out" resonates with the anti-colonial violence once advocated by Frantz Fanon as the only antidote to colonial power (1, 33, 34, 44, etc.). This is highly problematic because the narrator seems to align herself with the colonized, however implicitly and however metaphorically she may intend to do so. Other excerpts from "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" also tend toward this tone of lament and victimisation: "I feel imprisoned in my class" (50), for instance, or, "you taught me fear, but not how to fight" (95). Readers may admire the vehemence with which the narrator strives to reject her associations with the

[76] In her letters to loved ones in Canada, the narrator marvels that their "worlds" can exist simultaneously (74-75, 78). This sentiment is interesting and ambivalent when read in light of the themes of globalization and colonialism. Is the narrator reinforcing the specificity of places by denying globalization's power to create a single global space and time? Or, on the contrary, is she refusing to admit Penang's contemporaneity with North America, thereby implying that it exists on a different, more primitive, *other* plane? Imre Szeman discusses these two opposing tendencies in his article on Canadian literature and identity in a global context – see his "Belated or Isochronic? Canadian Writing, Time, and Globalization."

colonizer class, but her language of imprisonment and violence should give pause. How fair is it for her to self-identify as a victim of the colonial mentality when she enjoys luxury and privilege in the midst of her supposed victim status?

The narrator's tone is far from uniform throughout the text, and the problematic vehemence of the above quotes represent only one attitude that she adopts when addressing her colonial connections. As much as the narrator strives to move beyond a colonial "private hedges" outlook on her immediate environment, she is aware that she cannot escape "the tourist experience compounded with colonial history" (70). At times she expresses outright denial of her potentially neo-imperial position, as when she writes to her sister that the British colonial presence "still exists, much as it has done, tho obviously it's the end of an era. It ain't *my* era, or Pam's, tho everyone we meet seems to want to suggest it is, implicate us in it" (62). In a similar emphatic tone, she later writes "this is not my world, i can't live here" (84) and speaking of herself in the third person, "even her smile complies, complicit in its understanding. No she *doesn't* understand, why is she part of this?" (87-88). But in addition to these adamant expressions of frustration, there are moments when she acknowledges that her present-day trip to Penang inevitably echoes her family's colonial past. Rosemary Marangoly George has declared that "the self as 'memsahib' is a role that is as readily available to white women tourists today as it was to white women colonists yesterday" (95). This rings true when Marlatt's narrator comments that "it's strange being a princess again, the sheer luxury of this house" (67). She goes on to assert that "a little work would make me feel at home" (67), but her discomfort does not negate the weight of her personal history and its colonial imbrications. Indeed, the narrator

may feel the import of her past acting as a "hungry ghost" during her return to Penang through its spectral presence and tendency to consume her attempts to feel at ease. A portion of THE LINE portrays this astutely: "where did is all begin, begin, when she was so small? the line that was drawn to protect them from the strange, to return them to a past she feels distinctly separate from, she & her sister, implicated at their source" (87). She here expresses the tensions she is experiencing as she relates to this place and the implications of her past: she feels that she has somehow been "implicated" because of the circumstances of her childhood, yet she also feels "distinctly separate" from that past. She makes reference in this passage to "the line" which is an image similar to that of the "private hedges" made to separate supposed normalcy from danger and otherness. While seeking to look beyond the "private hedges," she must also acknowledge that they are part of a legacy she has received.

Thus far I have focused on place in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" as it connects with colonial discourse analysis and the narrator's attempt at grappling with her own complicity while maintaining an anti-colonial stance. Her interaction with the place she is visiting is personal and at times sensual (as in the "odd notes retrieved from the unreal" 76). She is aware that her perceptions of Penang are coloured not only by the attitudes she cultivates, but also by the memories that are evoked, and that evoke, the places around her. The confusion between place, the past, the present, memory and dream is evident in her account of driving out to Batu Ferringhi beach:

> a past that undermines the apparent newness of the present, a present that unlocks the hidden recesses of memory or dream which have also coloured it - & do i see what i haven't in some sense dreamed? […] looking for the beach i'd dreamed &/or the beach i remembered, saw another quite different one & found myself saying this is it. (75)

In addition to these highly personal interactions with the places around her, the narrator notes characteristics of this place that can be read as manifestations of globalization and that, in this text where the past is so insistently present, also have roots in earlier imperial eras. For instance, the narrator compares the commercial interests of the British and the Chinese middle class in Malaysia (63) but she also ponders the economic interventions of present-day global capitalism in the region: "each day's sewage / & all that shit / inter- / national finance leaves" (66). Fred Wah notes that when Marlatt splits a word over two lines "we can recognize more of the particularity of the word itself, of its presence and prescience than we normally do" (Wah 17). In this case, the line break between "inter" and "national" highlights the complex relationship between the nation-state and the international in the context of globalization and alludes to the interdependency of the local and the global.

A later section encapsulates the way that the past and present co-exist along with the local and the global to the point that such categories blur into each other:

> There are still *orang asli* (aboriginal people) who live in the jungle, wear loincloths & hunt with poisoned darts & blowguns – which all the little stores in Tanah Rata sell, along with gigantic rainbow butterflies, the largest of which is named Rajah Brooke, after the 19th C. English adventurer who ended up as Rajah of Sarawak, in perpetuity, etc. & in between the Fanta & fried mee oranges, you'll hear American rock & roll on the radios, a la Beach Boys or Everly Brothers, & even the humblest tamil shacks in Bringchang sport TV antennae – everyone's been watching the Olympics in that exotic, foreign, Canadian town. (78)

The tone of this excerpt is playful but it actually relates to many prominent contemporary topics in globalization studies concerning the precedents and manifestations of globalization. For instance, debates about the relationship between globalization and

Americanization can be connected to the references to "rock & roll" and the globalizing of media as in coverage of the Olympics.[77] The tongue-in-cheek reference to the "exotic, foreign, Canadian town" begs the question of the construction of exoticism and foreignness as well as the slipperiness of the term "local."[78] The references to aboriginal peoples who are "still" around, and to the Rajah of Sarawak, recall the colonial history of the place, now linked to capitalist ventures through the darts, blowguns and butterflies for sale in the Tanah Rata shops. As much as the narrator dwells on her personal history and/of involvement in this place, she also describes the realities of global capitalism and its connections to an earlier era. That is, there is a temporal interconnectivity in this place for her family and herself (the "strange conjunctions of past & present" 75) but there is also temporal interconnectivity when her use of place is imagined in light of contemporary debates about globalization. Through the images of the products in the Tanah Rata shops, Marlatt alludes to the historical roots of the text's present-day timeframe, in which colonialism, postcolonialism and globalization can be thought of in terms of one another.

The mention of the "exotic, foreign, Canadian town" hints at the ghostly presence of Canada throughout the text. Even the texts investment in themes of place and colonialism fits both appropriately and strangely into the Canadian literary tradition of female travel writers who have "occupied unique positions as reporters on and critics of colonialism" (Roy 9). Writing about her travels to Penang and to England, Marlatt evaluates that "both

[77] There is on-going debate about the extent to which globalization is synonymous with Americanization. Collected essays on globalization often address this issue, as in Fredric Jameson's "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue," Erkki Berndtson's "Globalization as Americanization, or George Ritzer and Todd Stillman's "Asessing McDonaldization, Americanization and Globalization."

[78] In her essay "Entering In: The Immigrant Imagination," Marlatt comments on the slipperiness of the exotic, remembering that when she immigrated to Canada, bears seemed much more "exotic" than the wild monkeys she encountered in Penang, whereas her Canadian schoolmates were impressed by her "exotic" tales of monkeys, cobras, and scorpions (*Readings* 19-20).

returns were incomplete, filtered always through my present Canadian consciousness" (*Readings* 21). Marlatt and her family moved from Malaysia to Vancouver when she was nine (*Readings* 18). When asked in an interview to account for the "vivid sense of place" in her writing, Marlatt attributes this firstly to her experience as an immigrant child, conscious of the danger of one place (Penang), and enthralled with the newness of another (Vancouver) (Kossew 51). Marlatt remembers falling in love with her new surroundings, but feeling marked by her English, colonial, Malaysian past: "I wanted to 'belong,' to be 'from' here but found there were differences not easy to bridge" (*Readings* 19). She became attentive to place by noting the distinctions between different places, and by trying to adapt to her new environment. Later on, Marlatt's place consciousness was nurtured through her alignment with the poetics of TISH, which encouraged her to explore North Vancouver and incorporate her impressions into her creative work (Kossew 52). Indeed (as mentioned above in the context of Butling's comments on TISH) the poetics of localism espoused by Charles Olson were crucial to TISH (Kamboureli 116). The idea of "locus" (as employed by George Bowering) was attractive because it stood outside of the debates over regionalism versus nationalism in Canadian literature, and because it connoted the concept of "locating oneself in a specific place, a conscious and ideological position" (Kamboureli 115). As I argue that place consciousness in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" relates to colonialism and to globalisation, it is important to remember that it also relates to Vancouver and Canada as other places, specifically places that Marlatt calls home and that fostered her very investment in place consciousness, through her personal and professional experiences as an immigrant to Canada.

Insofar as place consciousness is seen as having "irrupt[ed] into social and political analysis" in the 1990s (Dirlik 15), Marlatt's intent focus on place in this 1979 text could be read as avant-garde. In a feminist context, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that "a spatial rhetoric of location, multipositionality, and migration" became popular in feminist expression of the 1980s and 1990s (18); again, Marlatt's "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" came at the dawn of that era. Without boasting that Marlatt had a precocious, superior understanding of the potentials of what Dirlik calls "place-based imagination," it is true that given Marlatt's focus on place, her text can legitimately and fruitfully be read in light of a more recent wave of place consciousness. Notably, this piece of Canadian women's literature, written during the age of identity politics, resonates quite soundly with contemporary discussions of globalization and transnational feminism, starting with its prioritization of place. What is particularly interesting in the context of this dissertation project is the way that Marlatt's place-based narrative strategies may enable her to think through her situatedness vis-à-vis other women. Friedman writes,

> Where the temporal rhetoric of awakening tends to focus on gender in isolation from other systems of stratification, the spatial rhetoric of location emphasizes the interaction of gender with other forms of power relations based on such cultural categories as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, national origin, age, and so forth. (20)[79]

The abundant rhetoric around the idea of a "politics of location," which I address at length in my fourth chapter, is a prime example of the prominence of place-based metaphorics and

[79] Friedman puts much faith in these spatial concepts: "without this locational idiom, feminism would collapse back into misleading and politically regressive forms of universalism" (16). She is convinced that "Where the temporal rhetoric of awakening tends to focus on gender in isolation from other systems of stratification, the spatial rhetoric of location emphasizes the interaction of gender with other forms of power relations based on such cultural categories as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, national origin, age, and so forth" (20). Not all feminist scholars are as enthusiastic as Friedman about the potentials of spatial metaphors. Marjorie C. Miller, for example, argues against this language in feminist rhetoric, and prefers to identify "situations" rather than "locations" (180).

investigations in contemporary feminist work. Friedman implies that there is a link between a place-based outlook and an awareness of the complexity of the interconnectivity of identity categories. Can a creative exploration of spatial categories help to further the realization that gender is not a monolithic, universal category? To be sure, a focus on place can have its dangers,[80] and Friedman's comments above come dangerously close to asserting a flawed "progressive narrative of feminist history" in which Eurocentric feminism portrays itself as constantly evolving and improving, from wave to wave, by widening its inclusivity (Chakraborty 205). Mridula Nath Chakraborty notes that "feminist of colour argue that the very idea of a phase/stage/wave-based consciousness is an ideological construct of the Eurocentric subject that seeks to subsume and consume the challenges posed to it through notions of 'inclusion' and 'solidarity'" (205). Yet while Friedman's generalizations about feminist generations must be nuanced and critiqued, "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" does testify to the fact that an attention to a particular locale can foster awareness of the specificities of gender roles in specific contexts, especially in a self-reflexive mode like Marlatt's, whose narrative is highly conscious of her personal reactions to that place.

Mother and *Memsahib*

I have begun this chapter by proposing that Marlatt's engagement with place is a crucial part of "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" and that the nature of that engagement is

[80] For example, writing about globalization and literature, Paul Jay describes the trap of "a simple-minded binarism that facilely and uncritically celebrates the local as pure culture opposed to rapacious Westernization" (42). In an article on transnational feminisms, Khanna points out that the local can become fetishized, making coalition across localities feel impossible (211).

intentionally anti-colonial, however problematic that may sometimes seem given the narrator's privileged positioning. Furthermore, the text's place consciousness can be read alongside the theoretical attention to place seen in more recent globalization and transnational feminist criticism. Marlatt's place consciousness is in fact woven into her awareness of gender and feminism. This next section will move from the above general analysis of Marlatt's employment of place in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" to an inquiry into her representation of gender and the possible implications for transnational feminism. The childhood house to which the narrator returns incarnates the interwoven nature of place and gender in the text, given the attention to the physical space of the dwelling and the focus on the mother as mistress of that domestic place. The mother slides into the text unexpectedly, a full ten pages from its inception, in the poem "memsahib," which begins, "mistress / of her own / house" (58).[81] Her presence remains through the rest of the narrative, gaining a certain momentum and coming to particular prominence in "AS A CUP FILLS ITSELF IN THE STREAM" and in the final section "GETTING HERE." She is the *memsahib* that the narrator sometimes feels pressure to emulate, but she is not only (and not entirely) mistress of her own house. The narrator explores her mother's legacy, denying the *memsahib* role, but also recognizing that that role was not as definite as its title implied.

Thinking through issues of genre in relation to "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" is an interesting way to delve into the portrayal of motherhood in the text. Although I have chosen to distinguish between the authoring Marlatt and her narrator, the text obviously

[81] The fact that the mother is both absent and present in the text can be related to Di Brandt's assertion that "the search for the absent mother is a preoccupation in Marlatt's writing, from at least *Zócalo* (1977) onward" (45).

partakes of autobiography.[82] When it was originally published in *The Capilano Review*, the biographical information on the author stated that Marlatt lived in Penang as a child, went back in 1976 with her father and a sister, and stayed in her childhood home. This information clearly implies that the trip described in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" is an account of that 1976 re-visiting (97). The short description also clarifies that "Cille" in the text is a reference to Lucille, another of Marlatt's sisters, confirming the factual origins of the letter (97). In her study of Canadian women's autobiography, Helen Buss concurs with Bella Brodzki that women's autobiographies often accord a unique place to the other and that this can be related to the mother-daughter bond that keeps the mother "hovering" over the daughter's text (16-17). Indeed, ever since feminist scholars began to recuperate, anthologize, and theorize women's autobiographical writing (largely in the 1980s), they put forth the idea that women view themselves through their relationships with others, and especially through their relationships with their mothers (Gilmore x-xiii). Any blanket statement about the nature of women's autobiographical writing will inevitably be an exclusionary generalization. As Leigh Gilmore concludes, "My own research has not borne out the claim that all men or all women do any one thing in autobiography all the time" (11). However, Marlatt's own comments on the nature of autobiography affirm that it provides space to work through issues of relationships and complicities with others. In her essay "Self-Representation and Fictionalysis," she writes,

> Perhaps what we wake up to in autobiography is a beginning realization of the whole cloth of ourselves in connection with so many others. Particularly as women analyzing our lives, putting the pieces together, the repressed, suppressed, putting our finger on the power dynamics at play. It is exactly in

[82] As I discuss at the beginning and end of this chapter, "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" is much more than an autobiography; it is also epistolary, travelogue, bio-text, documentary, poetry collection, and collage.

> the confluence of fiction (the self or selves we might be) and analysis (of the roles we have found ourselves in, defined in a complex socio-familial weave), it is in the confluence of these two that autobiography occurs, the writing self writing its way to life, whole life. (*Readings* 124)

Like Gilmore, I am aware of the pitfalls of asserting that all women's autobiography unfolds in a certain way. But Marlatt's comments affirm that autobiography (as she conceives of it as a mixture of fiction and self-analysis) can foster realizations of connections with others, "power dynamics at play," and the "complex socio-familial weave." The link she makes between genre and content invites readers to be alert for these thematic elements in her own autobiographical writing. To use Buss' term (the verb choice is particularly apt considering the recurring allusion to ghosts throughout the text), [83] maternal figures do seem to "hover" in this autobiographical text, and to be connected with the process of self-realization and articulation described by Marlatt. How does the narrator's mother hover, and how does the narrator grapple with her illusive but insistent presence? How does the narrator explore her motherly origins, wondering about the ambivalence of the *memsahib* position and its legacy for her? And how does the mother-as-*memsahib* relate to the narrator's mother-as-servant?

The main elements that characterise the mother are showcased in "memsahib," the poem that introduces her into the text. There is, first of all, her connection with empire

[83] The metaphor of "hungry ghosts" is particularly fitting given the text's thematic connections with postcolonial theories, in which the concept of the "spectre" is often mobilized. I am thinking, for example, of Pheng Cheah's *Spectral Nationality*. In a feminist context, Ranjana Khanna argues that transnational feminisms are haunted by the spectre of colonialism (212). This is certainly the case for Marlatt's narrator as she tries to connect with differently-situated women in Penang. The metaphor of the ghost is also pertinent in Marlatt's Canadian literary context, where ghosts have been important at least since Earle Birney proclaimed their national absence. In her essay, "Self-Representation and Fictionalysis," Marlatt suggests that addressing the hungry ghosts that "pursue each one of us" enables us to understand that our "context is huge, a living tissue we live together with/in" (*Readings* 125). While reading "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," we wonder what or who are the hungry ghosts of the narrative: is history a hungry ghost? Is colonialism? Is the figure of the mother?

through her position as mistress of a colonial house. The first lines of the poem suggest that this is a powerful position ("ordered") but it is also strictly domestic ("chicken for dinner" and "the children's / small world to move into"). The poem goes on to present the mother as healer, but also as sickly: "eased / death & small / wounds, cure-all, / any sepsis, except / her own." This juxtaposition runs throughout the text. The mother bandages cuts, but is herself the victim of some unspecified devastation: "& lost, finally, found off- / center, *mata*, her unruly / self / unloved, locked." The final image of the poem is of the sun ("*mata hari*" means eye of the dawn), which evokes empire. But despite her position as *memsahib*, the mother somehow does not fall in line with the sun. In opposition to the centrality of the sun, she is "off- / center," a word that is divided onto two lines in the poem in a visual enactment of the idea of being off-center. The image of *mata hari* also alludes to the historical figure of Mata Hari, the famous femme fatale of World War I. Margaretha Geertruida Zelle, born in the Netherlands in 1876, became a famous dancer known as Mata Hari, but was eventually executed in 1917 when the French convicted her of being a German spy (whereas the Germans claimed that she was a French spy, and therefore a double agent). Before launching her dancing career, Mata Hari lived for a time in Java, where her husband served as a British colonial officer. When she took up dancing, she invented an exotic past for herself, saying that she was of South Asian origin and had been a temple slave before escaping to Europe. Her dances were seen as authentic oriental performances, and she eventually toured with a lecturer on Javanese and Hindu culture, who lent credibility to her show.[84]

[84] There are numerous websites and biographies that recount various versions of Mata Hari's life and death. The information I have related comes from Ronald Millar's biography, and from the article "Mata Hari" at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mata_Hari.

Many details of Mata Hari's life remain illusive, including whether or not she actually was a spy, and for whom. The identification between Mata Hari and the narrator's mother in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" begins here, with this sense of an illusive, inaccessible past. The image of being "locked / up in a picture, trembling / under the mask" could, in the case of the narrator's mother, refer to a façade of domestic authority; Mata Hari, however, chose the mask of Orientalism in order to earn her living. The idea of unruliness, also present in the poem, reinforces the allusion to Mata Hari, whose sexualized performances ventured beyond European conventions of public display. The "unruly / self" of the *memsahib* is the side of the narrator's mother that was "lost," "off-center," and "didn't / know what to 'do.'" The final section of the poem emphasises this ambivalent, discordant mother figure. Marlatt writes that there is "sun through all her rooms she / closed the curtains on." This formulation is inconclusive. At first glance, she seems to have blocked out the sun from her domestic space, but the phrasing suggests that she has tried to curtain off the rooms, and that the sun is in the curtained rooms. The overall effect is ambiguous, resonating with the concept of "disparities" (51) seen throughout the text because the mother is both healer and unwell, mistress of the house and yet dissonant with the empire she represents.

In her book *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of the Woman in the Colonial Text*, Jenny Sharpe defines the *memsahib*: "Historically, *memsahib* is a class-restrictive term of address meaning "lady master," which was used for the wives of high-ranking civil servants and officers. Stereotypically, she is a small-minded, social snob who tyrannically rules over a household of servants and refuses to associate with Indians" (91). Ann Laura Stoler

agrees that there is a "universally negative stereotype of the colonial wife" (56). She adds that scholarship on colonial women has tended to polarize between attempting to show that women were as involved as men in the racism of colonialism, and attempting to acquit them of such involvement (56).[85] Domestic space is sometimes defended as a "feminized, depoliticized home, as the locus for a kinder, gentler colonialism" (173). But as Rosemary Marangoly George points out, the English home in the colonies was "paradoxically domestic as well as public" (97). The *memsahib*'s task was to "replicate the empire on a domestic scale – a benevolent, much supervised terrain where discipline and punishment must be meted out with an unwavering hand" (104). Acting on a domestic scene, the *memsahib*'s role is nonetheless a mirror of the larger political context. For the specific *memsahib* portrayed in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," she assumes her role as mistress and enacts a certain amount of control, but in the eyes of her daughter she embodies neither a tyrant nor an innocent.

As a text that prioritises an engagement with place, "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" explores the specific space of the domestic, here connected with the mistress of the house and her imperial role. The focus on domestic space is logical, given the attention to the specificity of place and the potentials of spatial metaphorics outlined above, but it also connects with feminist discussions on the concept of "home." Michèle Gunderson begins her article on Marlatt's *Ghost Works* (the 1993 collection that includes "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts") by referring to Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's article "Feminist Politics: What's Home Go to Do with It?" in which they examine Minnie Bruce

[85] Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel echo this observation in their introduction to *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, page 4.

Pratt's autobiographical narrative "Identity: Skin Blood Heart." Gunderson goes on to trace Marlatt's use of the word "home" throughout *Ghost Works*, connecting the concepts of home and mother, and ultimately arguing that Marlatt reinvents home and mother as she constructs her sense of self (83, 87-88).[86] Despite her initial citation of Martin and Mohanty, Gunderson does not mention the importance of specific cities that they identify in Pratt's narrative. Martin and Mohanty repeatedly point out that Pratt describes the geography, demography and architecture of her hometowns as they provide "concrete, physical anchoring points in relation to which she both sees and does not see certain people and things in the buildings and on the streets" (196). Martin and Mohanty conclude that for Pratt, "Geography, demography and architecture, as well as the configuration of her relationships to particular people (her father, her lover, her workmate), serve to indicate the fundamentally relational nature of identity and the negations on which the assumption of singular, fixed and essential self is based" (196). In her attention to a specific place and to the domestic space of her childhood home, Marlatt is also learning about the "relational nature of identity" and the exclusions that permit the myth of the essential, individual self. As she thinks about her identity in relation to her mother, she is grappling not only with the concept of "home," as Gunderson points out, but also with the literal and metaphorical "house" as the domestic space where familial and colonial relations were enacted.

[86] Although Gunderson focuses on the contributions of Martin and Mohanty, the concept of "home" has been important in Marlatt's Canadian context as well. In some ways it links back to the classic question of Canadian letters: where is here? The titles of two important recent critical collections – *Home-Work* and *Unhomely States* – attest to the continued currency of the notion of "home," especially in relation to the postcolonial Canadian literary studies practiced in these collections. A number of prominent Canadian authors also reflect on "home" in *Writing Home: A PEN Canada Anthology* and the idea of "writing home" is also mobilized in discussions of diasporic writings in Canada. George Elliott Clarke's *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* also springs to mind.

In "AS A CUP FILLS ITSELF IN THE STREAM," Marlatt conjures up the literal space of the childhood home in order to depict her mother's role therein. She writes:

> What the Mem says goes (sometimes). what the Mem says exists as a separate entity in the house, to be listened to & walked around, with suitable contrition if asked (giggling in the back rooms), but separate, separate, from the way life moves, on. what the Mem says was meant to last. like mercurochrome on a cut. like the contents of a steel trunk… (80)

Clearly the *memsahib*'s orders are a tangible presence in the domestic space, but they are also non-integrated and easily side-stepped. The steel trunk of this passage is ironically full of must and moths, "all it was designed to prevent" (80), so the comparison with "what the Mem says" means the exact opposite of the preservation and permanence that the image of a steel trunk would usually imply. The "giggling in the back rooms" refers to the servants' living quarters, the implication being that the servants are not as respectfully obedient as they may appear. While "what the Mem says" is a separate entity in the house, the servants' voices inhabit the domestic space and exclude the mother: "always there were voices calling to each other in another language rising through the house, full of incomprehensible import, intent on each other, saying something even in the chatter… what was being told she was excluded from? did she wonder?" (80). The *memsahib* is far from all-powerful here. Her control is solid and substantial ("a separate entity") but it is not all-pervasive and it can be playfully avoided ("walked around, with suitable contrition if asked"). Moreover, the servants' voices are a vital element of the *memsahib*'s domestic space and they successfully exclude her. She may be mistress of the house, but she is far from embodying the stereotype of the tyrant.

As well as exploring the caricatured conceptions of the figure of the *memsahib*, historical inquiries have also connected the *memsahib* with colonial violence. In her article "Homes in the Empire, Empires in the Home," Rosemary Marangoly George describes the two levels on which Englishwomen propped up the structures of empire. The novels she analyses emphasize a first level: women as "managers of 'base camp,' helpmates and partners in the imperial enterprise" (103). The second level "is the more covertly articulated use of the white woman's presence in the colonies as a rationalization for the 'necessity' of the violent repression of colonized peoples" (103). In other words, colonizers rationalized their control of colonized populations by arguing that they needed to protect white women from colonized, racialized men. According to Ann Laura Stoler, this fear of a colonized man attacking a white woman was called the "Black Peril" and was referenced throughout much of the British empire (58). The logic (or lack thereof) of the Black Peril connects back to the historical figure of Mata Hari. In his biography of Mata Hari, Ronald Millar concludes that "Mata Hari was just one of the scapegoats for the military failures that resulted from the French army being unprepared for modern warfare in 1914" (197). Mata Hari, therefore, was a scapegoat for military failure; indeed, a judge at her trial implied that she was responsible for thousands of deaths (Millar 151). In retrospect, however, "the bulk of evidence in the Mata Hari case now reveals her main 'crimes' to have been promiscuity and arrogance" (Grayzel 45). Her overt sexuality was mobilized against her in the context of war. The idea of the "Black Peril" is similar in that women's sexuality (in this case, the supposed vulnerability of women's sexuality) was employed as a scapegoat for violence. Given the connection between the *memsahib* and Mata Hari established in the "mem sahib"

poem (58), it is fitting to link the rationale behind Mata Hari's execution with the concept of the "Black Peril," as both take advantage of various conceptions of women's sexuality in order to justify violence.

A connection between womanhood and fear is present in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," and can be read as a legacy of the "Black Peril" panic. The narrator reflects on her fears several times throughout the text and traces the origins of much of her fear back to her mother. Indeed, in the last paragraph of the text, when she addresses her mother directly, she writes, "you taught me fear but not how to fight" (95). This complaint is another instance wherein the narrator veers close to self-pity and positions herself problematically as a victim of colonial mentalities. She is trying to account for the sense of fear and emergency that pervaded the house: "quick! emergency (kabun drunk & beating up his wife again, the dog run over, the child dying in the back room), the dying flowers, scorpion & snakebite, mad monkeys screeching in the trees, unexpected storms & penance & strange tension (always 'incomprehensible')…" (81). This sense of emergency hangs around her mother, whose love of flowers and her daily ministrations "to the vase, to snakebite, to bloody knees" are described just prior to this segment. The mother's evaluation of emergencies is described ironically: the crises involving the servants are relegated to the brackets alongside the death of the dog, whereas the threats that come from the natural and animal world around them are outside of the parentheses and therefore emphasized. This certainly recalls the "private hedges" mentality that the narrator diagnoses throughout the text. Local animals and local rituals are perceived as threatening and induce more fear than domestic abuse or death among the servants. The fear that the narrator learns as a child is a

fear of an unknown surrounding environment; it is also a fear divided along class and racial lines, given the dismissive attitude toward actual emergencies in the servants' quarters.

Fear has stayed with the narrator throughout her life and she recognises it when she returns to Penang. Walking outside alone at night, she feels "afraid of this life & what the night hides, bats? cobras?" (49). "Scorpion and snakebite, mad monkeys" (81) could easily have been added to this list of threatening presences, though they appear in the later passage that is a flashback to her childhood. The narrator warily observes that her childhood home is still managed in response to such fear. When she returns home after her frightening night-time walk, she finds Mr. Y and her father dutifully locking up, "then a to-do about locking the ironwork gate in the upper hall that separates the bedrooms from the rest of the house ('we've had a spot of trouble')" (49). The sleeping residents are supposedly vulnerable to the penetration of forces from the outside, or even from the servants in "the rest of the house." Echoes of the "Black Peril" are evident. Later, the narrator calls the house "a sealed fortress" (52), and immediately turns to an analysis of her own fears: "I'm finding out more about the taboos I was raised with, the unspoken confines of behaviour, than I am about Penang. Still, that's useful – it makes me see the root of my fears" (53). Her phrase "still, that's useful" suggests that initially she had expected to find out more about Penang than about her own psyche, yet she accepts the fact that she has been led into self-examination and self-positioning. She appropriates the image of the snake ("Snakes." is the first word / sentence of "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts") to represent her fear (53), which is significant considering that she has been brought up to fear "snakebite" (81) and other such threats from what lies beyond the private hedges of the colonial

lifestyle. In the first journal entry of the text, the narrator describes a poisonous cobra (46), and then juxtaposes that murderous potential of snakes with the story of a protective, life-giving snake that shielded the Buddha from dangerous rains by wrapping itself around his body and covering his head with its seven heads (47). The paragraphs concludes with an observation: "To be wrapt in that other, that so non-human, & not suffer revulsion but see the snake's gift of protection – must be what we call 'grace'" (47). This is a powerful moment in the text, especially since the tone of this thoughtful reflection contrasts with the immediate, journalistic prose of the first two paragraphs. It becomes doubly powerful when we realize that the narrator goes on to represent her own fear through the image of the snake and when we see her attempts at engaging with what is other to her. "Snake again signals offlimits, danger to me," she writes early on, "I can't get past the snakes in my life" (53). In this passage she takes more responsibility for the management of her own fear, as opposed to passages quoted above in which she focuses more on her family and her mother as imposers of fear.

Tracking the theme of fear in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" provides a concrete example of the interconnectivity of history, gender, and place in the text. In terms of history, I have suggested that fear in the context of this text must be linked back to apprehension operating in British colonial discourse, where it was already connected with gender through the scapegoat of the colonial white woman and the supposedly impending "Black Peril." The fear also has personal historical connections for the narrator, who remembers the warnings from her mother about crossing the boundaries of their literal and metaphorical "private hedges." She recalls her mother saying "but you *know* you weren't

supposed to be out there!" and would have liked to explain by telling her, "for you, mother, to prove, orchids do grow wild on the terrace you said no flowers would grow" (83). In terms of place, the "private hedges" mentality is explicit in the mother's warning about boundaries that must not be crossed, as well as in the distrust of the surrounding environment seen in her underestimation of the indigenous orchids. The relationship between fear and place is also evident in the characterisation of the domestic space of the house, described as "a sealed fortress" (52) with countless locks (91). The space of the childhood home is organised according to fear of penetration from the unruly outside. The evocation of the domestic space inevitably brings up gender, so that both history and place in relation to fear lead back to the figure of the *memsahib*, the narrator's mother, who has passed on her own fear as a legacy.

It would be misleading to imagine the narrator's mother as an all-powerful *memsahib* instilling fear in her children, for her character is much more ambiguous. Consider, for instance, the final paragraph of the text, in which the narrator addresses her mother, as it relates to the theme of fear: "you knew the dark, conspiracy, how they keep power in their hands, unnamed (you forgot, we give ourselves up to). you taught me fear but not how to fight. you, misspelled, gave yourself over to the dark of some other light, leaving me here with the words, with fear, love, & a need to keep speaking" (95). Certainly she places the origins of her fear with her mother, as in *Ana Historic*: "your fear i inherited, mother dear" (79).[87] However, there is also a sense in this passage, as elsewhere (58), that the mother has been partially victimized by the regime under which she has lived. The Mata

[87] In fact, the themes of motherhood, servanthood, and the figure of the *memsahib*, as well as colonial and postcolonial settings, are recurrent in Marlatt's work, particularly in her novel *Taken*.

Hari connection comes to mind again, insofar as she was a victim of a wartime regime, and her condemnation may have been occasioned by the sexual nature of her career. Marlatt's narrator describes her mother as "deprived of words that spoke what you know" and alludes to a "sacrifice you knew they exacted" (95). This recalls the images of the mother as lost, unloved, locked up, and trembling in the "memsahib" poem that introduced her into the text and connected her to Mata Hari (58). The mother as *memsahib* is not demonized but neither is she acquitted for her undesirable legacies. The narrator explores the ways in which her mother's gendered role was formed by her historical, class and race-based positioning, and she knows that she must address the implications for herself. Soon after arriving in Penang, she realizes that she and her sister "as the women of the house" are expected to make sure the domestic machine runs smoothly (67-68). With a defiance reminiscent of her childhood disobedience (82-83), the narrator and her sister attempt to refuse the *memsahib* position: "both of us dislike the role &, like children, rebel by acting dumb" (68). What they reject is the determinism of the *role* – the performance – of the *memsahib*,[88] yet the narrator also grapples with the falsity of that role by recognising the ambiguity that characterises her remembrances of her mother.

In the same essay in which she comments on women's autobiography, Marlatt states, "History is not the dead and gone; it lives on in us in the way it shapes our thought and especially our thought about what is possible" (125). Insofar as Marlatt's narrator is

[88] Allusions to acting and role-plays are scattered throughout "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," most notably in one of the longer poems, "STREET OPERA" (71-73). Marlatt reflects on the relationship between subjectivity and performance in her essay "Perform(ing) on the Stage of Her Text:" "That self is what gets enacted in telling, under the stage lights of personal recollection and narration, against and with already read, already scripted notions of gender – and class, race, ethnic background, Multi-faceted refractions. Unravelling of roles across illumined and dark spaces. All of which, taken together, might construct the 'truth' of what we call this self" (*Readings* 203).

pursuing "what is possible" on the trip back to Penang, she engages with her personal history by remembering and depicting her mother in order to understand how her mother's complex status might affect her present-day perspective. The focus on the *memsahib* mother connects with the focus on place: both insist on domestic space (the house surrounded by hedges), and on temporal interconnectivity (the way that the present can be haunted by the "hungry ghost" of the past). Through both themes, Marlatt's narrator is working on admitting and processing her complicity with the colonial establishment. Cast in the role of the *memsahib* in the absence of her mother, the narrator wonders the extent to which she can reject that role and work to bridge class and racial differences. This is most evident in her relationship with Eng Kim, the other mother of "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts."

Mother and Servant

The narrator of "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" acknowledges that she had "two mothers, two" (80),[89] and she is referring to Eng Kim, who was their caretaker when they were children and who still lives in the same house, now acting as a servant to Mr. Y and his family. Eng Kim is also mentioned directly in Marlatt's novel *Taken* (119-120), and may well be based on the "amah" that Marlatt refers to in her interview with Sue Kossew (52) and whom she mentions periodically in her collection of essays (*Readings* 18, 21, 134). Encountering Eng Kim for the first time since her childhood, the narrator of "In the

[89] In her reading of the mother figures of "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," Di Brandt appropriately points out that it is only the privileged position of this colonial household that permits the role of mother to be divided/doubled between two women, occasioning "a separation between the mother as titular head of the household and mother as caretaker, nurturer" (52).

Month of Hungry Ghosts" experiences a mixture of responses. She records her sense of connection with Eng Kim, as well as her desire to deepen their relationship, while contrasting this with an impression of separation and distance that she also feels. I will argue that her longing to bond with Eng Kim embodies an admiration for images of commonality and community seen throughout the text. Yet even as she seeks connection across difference, she encounters the difficulties of such connection as both she and Eng Kim act out roles formed by their shared history. The narrator's reflections on herself as a "Western woman" and on the challenge of developing a significant relationship with a servant resonate with transnational feminism's reminder that common gender does not result in automatic solidarity. She is led to reflect on her own privilege and position in productive ways.

Like the "memsahib" poem that introduces the mother, the section that brings Eng Kim into the text is fraught with ambiguity but is representative of the characterisation of Eng Kim that follows in the rest of the narrative. In the July 22 journal entry, the narrator writes, "Eng Kim: recognized her as soon as I saw her, but curiously didn't want to show my recognition immediately" (50). Already the narrator is self-reflexive in her response to Eng Kim: she identifies her reticence and finds it curious; she also describes the immediacy of her reaction to Eng Kim. She continues: "She's hardly changed at all – so amazingly similar in appearance after 25 years. Still that almost shy, perfectly naïve sweetness – how can she have lived these years so apparently untouched? […] The perfect servant, neat & unassuming, quiet as a shadow – yet I catch a glint of humour in her smile" (50). This passage is an uncomfortable one to read. Despite her awareness that her conclusions are

based on an outward impression ("in appearance," "apparently"), the narrator seems to assume too readily that she can decipher Eng Kim. I cringe at her presumptuousness when she describes her as "perfectly naïve" and at her confidence in detecting hidden "humour in her smile" (50). The description is particularly disconcerting because the narrator's confident evaluation of Eng Kim is reminiscent of the ethnocentric feminism denounced by feminists of colour. For instance, in her watershed article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Mohanty argues that "Western feminist writing about Third World women" tends to relegate Third World women to "object" status (39). Mohanty also notes the paternalistic tone adopted by Western feminist discourse when discussing Third World women (40). Marlatt's narrator veers uncomfortably close to this mentality when she ascribes child-like characteristics to Eng Kim. In this passage, the narrator assumes that she can read Eng Kim at a glance, as if she were a superficial object, as if Eng Kim lacked depth and a personal history that has unfolded since their previous encounter.[90]

Ultimately, the narrator's initial impressions of Eng Kim must reveal more about herself than about Eng Kim. The fact that she perceives her as timeless, for example, is of particular interest given the description of the nun that appears two pages earlier. While

[90] Consider also the presumptuousness of a comment that was (understandably) edited out of the final version: in the original letter from Penang, Marlatt states that "Even Eng Kim thinks & speaks like a European" (Letter dated 23 July 1976. Daphne Marlatt fonds LMS-0119 1985-8 Box 27. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.). Although I hesitate to bring this archival draft to bear on the published text (see my second chapter for more thoughts on literary archives), I mention it here for three reasons. First, it is a further example of what I have already perceived in the text, namely the narrator's assumption that she can "read" Eng Kim. Second, it is interesting to consider the reductive presuppositions behind the suggestion of the monolithic "European" as well as the qualifier "even" (as in, "*Even* Eng Kim…"). Third, this passage troubles my own reading of the text because I argue that Marlatt depicts Eng Kim to some extent as an "other" whom she would like to relate to, whereas the summation that she "thinks & speaks like a European" challenges that depiction.

visiting a temple, the narrator witnesses "the strange displays of sacred power such as the 40 yr old body of the 20 yr old nun who'd died of malaria, […] flesh of hand wrinkled & dark as if embalmed. Her not rotting seen as the sign of her spirituality" (48). Is this also true of Eng Kim, who has "lived these years so apparently untouched" (50)? This is not to suggest that Eng Kim is akin to the dead but rather that the narrator may venerate her as the faithful venerate the nun, and interpret her "not rotting" as a kind of magical sign of her inherent goodness. Of course, it is possible that the narrator's description of Eng Kim is inherently false. Perhaps Eng Kim acts shy and shadowlike as an act of rebellion – and this possibility ought to occur to the narrator since she herself "rebel[s] by acting dumb" (68). Ultimately the text cannot access Eng Kim, and even refuses to do so, which is highlighted by the fact that she is never quoted directly or pictured in any of the photographs. The focus is rather on the narrator's own responses to this other hovering mother figure.

When the narrator re-encounters Eng Kim for the first time, she wonders, "Will it be possible to know her better?" (50). Her desire to connect with Eng Kim intensifies throughout the text. After the initial description of Eng Kim in the July 22 journal entry, the same encounter is described again in a letter dated July 23 (which, in defiance of chronological order, is actually placed much later in the narrative). This second account of their meeting repeats elements of the first: the narrator records her immediate recognition of Eng Kim and describes her silence and girlishness. But here the narrator also reveals the deep emotional response she felt: "But more her smile – it's as if i'd never gone away i know that smile so completely & love it, yes, it's the love that astonishes me. That face told me as much as my mother's" (67). She goes on to tell the recipient of the letter, Roy

Kiyooka, that she and her sister want to "break down the wall that separates us from Eng Kim" (68) and their first attempt at doing so is to eat durian fruit with her and the cook. In keeping with his "private hedges" mentality (and because durian fruit emit a very strong order), Mr. Y requests that they eat outside and so they end up eating at a table on the walkway between the kitchen and the servants' quarters (68). This location is significant, symbolising the divide and the potential bridge between Eng Kim and the narrator, and between the servants and the masters of the house. A photograph of this liminal walkway space appears later on in the text as the narrator mourns her inability to connect with Eng Kim: "failing to bridge the divide a tileroofed corridor covers, […] failing to ask the right questions, wanting to ask, what was it like for you?" (89). In fact, despite the narrator's expressed desire for connection, the durian fruit episode is their most extensive encounter recorded in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts."[91]

Numerous images throughout the text showcase the narrator's admiration of community and commonality, and link to her desire for a reciprocal relationship with Eng Kim. In her anti-colonial engagement with her surroundings, the narrator pays particular notice to elements of her environment that evoke oneness and common identity. For instance, walking barefoot in a temple, she reflects on "the tile those hundreds of feet were treading along with hers, no different, no other than" (88). She delights similarly in crowds of people, noting that "the press in the streets is almost amniotic, it contains & carries everyone" (63). The "amniotic" press is reminiscent of an earlier passage in which the narrator lies in bed enjoying the sound of rain falling outside and feeling like a "child-

[91] Durian fruit is a key symbol in Larissa Lai's 2002 *Salt Fish Girl* (Birns 10). It would be interesting to compare the resonances of these two representations of durian fruit in Canadian women's writing!

being, sentient, but only just, skin (not even 'mine') merging with an air that is full of melody & rain-breath" (54). Both of these passages evoke the womb and suggest blurred borders – between people, and between the human and the natural environment. The narrator's awareness and appreciation of these experiences flow from her place-based approach to Penang, but also extend from her desire to connect across the difference that she perceives between herself and others – with Eng Kim, for example. These desires are manifest in Marlatt's essays as well. A few years later, she would write that "notions of privacy are only glass walls set up to prevent us experiencing our commonality, our undefined common wealth" (*Readings* 27). Additional images in the text confirm attraction to the potentials of realized commonality: she values birdsong because it represents "shared public space a song arena where each declares itself" (54). Each bird is unique but contributing to a common melody. Her appreciation of crowds is similar: she lists the individuals she notices within a crowd and enjoys the variety of components that make up the whole (63, 69, 76). All of these images are about being-in-common with others and about disparate individuals bonded in relationship to each other through shared location.

The narrator quickly learns that participation in that shared public space is not as idyllic as her image of the birdsong. She feels dissonant with the place because of her connections to colonialism and her life as a "Western woman." The complexity of her standing is summed up in a reflection that comes right after her first description of Eng Kim: "O the disparities – how can I ever relate the two parts of myself? This life would have killed me – purdah, a woman in – the restrictions on movement, the confined reality. I can't stand it. I feel imprisoned in my class – my? This I what I came out of. & how else

can I be here?" (50). This striking passage deserves extensive comment. The tone of the quotation is clearly unsettled, as is emphasized by the short, choppy sentences, the preponderance of question marks, and the lamenting "O" that begins the paragraph. The narrator is struggling with her situatedness, and brings up the intersections of her gender, class, origins, and mobility through mention of purdah, movement, confinement and imprisonment. She realizes that her experience of womanhood is situated and – perhaps mistakenly – she concludes that she experiences greater freedom as a "Western woman" than she would in the colonial household in Penang. In this quote, she also recognises (and despises) her personal historical connections with the ruling class. She alludes to her present-day complicity by acknowledging that her trip to Penang and her time in her childhood house would not be possible without these connections and her current ability to travel ("how else can I be here?"). The passage feels fierce and honest, but there is a disturbing subtext that must be addressed. That is, to what extent does her attitude spring from a feeling of superiority as a "Western woman"? To imagine that life in Penang would have killed her is potentially insulting toward all the women who survive quite successfully in that environment, or who could not leave even if they wanted to. Her mention of purdah, which she associates uniquely with confinement, is cursory and dismissive. Indeed, the narrator seems to set up "the Third World woman" (as denounced by Mohanty) and to assume that it would be intolerable to live such a life. Conversely, this disconcerting outburst is partially redeemed through the possibility that the narrator is qualifying the life of the *memsahib* as one of restriction and confinement. After all, the images of restricted movement are associated with the ruling class when she writes that she feels imprisoned in

her class. Still, the overall tone of self-pity and condemnation remains troubling. It is clear that the narrator is torn between these vehement – and problematic – expressions of distaste, and more careful examination of her on-going complicity. Finally, consider the discomfort, self-criticism and yearning exhibited in the following passage, which alludes once again to the complex intersections of gender, race and class: "We both felt separate & visible in our hired trisha pedalled by someone else (an incredibly skinny man) – uncomfortable parodies of the leisured class. Is this the only way to be a white woman here? Or is this the condition of being a member of an exploitive & foreign moneyed class?" (63).

Ultimately the narrator is wondering to what extent her current experience of Penang is necessarily determined by her connection with the colonial ruling class; hence, she is trying to grasp her complicity and its implications. This question is explicitly articulated toward the end of the text, appearing, appropriately, on the same page as the photo of the liminal walkway. "do beginnings inevitably shape what follows?" she asks (89). In this passage, the narrator, here described in the third person, is acknowledging her "childish confusion of Eng Kim & mother extant" (88), whereas her father is insisting that the distinction between the two women remain clear and hierarchical. That is, "he separates what she wants to enter, asking how it enters her, her life which began its dim beginnings here" (88). From there she voices her query about the determinism of beginnings, and goes on to lament the racial and class divide symbolised by the servants' walkway. The word "beginning(s)" is repeated at least four times throughout this section, demonstrating the centrality of the question of the legacy of personal history. In asking this question the

narrator accomplishes more than just the expression of her discouragement or frustration; rather, she is engaging in an essential feature of transnational feminist practice. Sherene Razack asserts that "a central aspect of a transnational feminist approach is its attention to complicity" (52) and the nature of her complicity is at the core of the narrator's reflection. She identifies her complicity with colonial rule as the divisive factor between herself and Eng Kim: they both have roles prescribed by their different, intersecting personal histories that complicate the being-in-common to which the narrator aspires.

Her desire for connection with Eng Kim functions as a particular site and catalyst for the narrator to address her historical complicity with oppression. Her longing for greater intimacy with Eng Kim is significant in light of the colonial anxiety surrounding the intimacy of the child-servant relationship, which was feared because of the physicality of the relationship, as well as the potential for the transmission of "other" languages. In her writings on the Dutch Indies, Ann Laura Stoler describes such anxiety and the racially-coded notions of intimacy that ensued. Intimacy and the servant-child relationship connect back to "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" in three intersecting and revealing ways: first, there is the narrator's yearning for greater intimacy with Eng Kim during her return trip to Penang, as mentioned above. Moving back in time, there is also the surprising sense of intimacy that the narrator experiences when she first sees Eng Kim after twenty-five years: "her smile – it's as if i'd never gone away i know that smile so completely & love it, yes it's the love that astonishes me" (67). Reaching still further back in time, there is the intimacy with Eng Kim that the narrator remembers feeling as a child: "That face told me as much as my mother's […] I must have spent hours of accumulated moments watching

it" (67). In her essay "Difference (Em)bracing," Marlatt remembers "the complexities of the power dynamic between colonial children and their mother-substitutes […] who illicitly imparted some of their culture, some of their experience to the Mem's children. I grew up loving the emotive sound of women's voices and distrustful of a system that dismissed women's experience in general, and some women's more than others'" (*Readings* 134). The surprising love that the narrator feels when she sees Eng Kim is an unexpected echo of the relationship they shared when she was a child. Can the memory of that relationship also fuel the intimacy that the narrator wants to develop twenty-five years afterwards? In other words, is there something in that childhood love that can be recuperated? Indeed, as the narrator wonders whether "beginnings inevitably shape what follows" (89), is it empowering for her to remember that her "beginnings" included not only a distasteful involvement in colonial rule, but also a memorable, caring relationship with Eng Kim? These suggestions tread on dangerous grounds, most notably because Eng Kim might neither remember their past relationship in the same way, nor feel the same surprising love. Stoler warns of the slipperiness of "memory-work" and ultimately urges postcolonial scholars to focus on *what* is remembered and *how* it is remembered, rather than "reducing acts of memory to constructions of the present or upholding memory as privileged access to a real past" (170).[92] With this caution in mind, I contend that the intimacy that the narrator claims with Eng Kim is most fascinating when viewed as a strategy she uses to process the debilitating sense of complicity that she feels. That is, she remembers and sources her

[92] The narrator's "memory-work" regarding her childhood relationship with Eng Kim may be heavily influenced by a sense of nostalgia. In an article on contemporary travel writing, Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan note that nostalgia is "a contradictory, even paradoxical process, veering from illusion to strenuous exercise of memory, from cultural self-congratulation to self-critique" (151). This serves as a helpful reminder, in conjunction with Stoler's caution, that the narrator's memories of Eng Kim ought not to be read as factual accounts of the past.

childhood emotions in order to combat the *memsahib* role she feels forced into as an adult. Drawing on the intimacy that she has felt, and the intimacy she wishes she could cultivate, becomes a part of her process of grappling with her complicity in oppression.

Complicity and other Feminist Strategies

The need to examine one's own complicity has been an integral part of transnational feminisms from their inception, insofar as transnational feminisms have their roots in a critique of a Western concept of global sisterhood that masked imperialistic and racist attitudes. By denouncing a definition of "woman" that translated practically into "white, western, middle-class woman," early critics of imperial feminism were inviting women to be accountable and honest about their situatedness. In *Scattered Hegemonies* Grewal and Kaplan urge women to acknowledge that their privileges may be linked to someone else's oppression (19). Kaushalya Bannerji echoes this recommendation by stating that women need to trace their connections to other oppressions and to other liberations (82). Razack speaks of this growing awareness in the first person: "I must consider how I am implicated in the flow of ideas, labour and capital that marks the financialization of the globe […] I conclude that being aware of my subject position means tracing the hierarchies in which I am both subordinated and privileged" (Razack "Your" 39-40). For all of these feminists, acknowledging ones own complicity is part of the larger project of transnational feminisms. In "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," Marlatt offers a particular and productive example of a woman grappling with her complicity as she confronts her mother's legacy and as she tries to enter into relationship with a very differently situated woman, Eng Kim. I have

noted moments in the text that strike me as problematic in terms of the narrator's privileged positioning; nonetheless I maintain that her attempts to think about her complex standing are fruitful and thought-provoking.

"In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" demonstrates that thinking about complicity is one aspect of articulating the complex connections that make up a postcolonial and globalized world and that the process involves thinking about difference and about history as they constitute and affect relationships.[93] The fact that the narrator and Eng Kim are both women – and even the bond they supposedly experienced when the narrator was a child – does not override their contrasting statuses as constructed by racialization and colonization. This is not to suggest that they are permanently locked in to their master/servant roles; the ambiguous characterisation of the mother/memsahib discussed above insists that such roles are always multi-faceted, interdependent, and shifting. However, the narrator must think about the construction of difference when her admiration for images of commonality and community refuse to correspond with her lack of connection with Eng Kim. Subsequently, thinking about difference in this situation inevitably means thinking about histories and the historical roots of present-day inequalities. Ranjana Khanna argues that transnational feminist coalitions are necessarily "haunted by the spectre of colonialism" and must "find a

[93] Both of these terms – difference and history – are slippery and powerful within the context of feminisms. Christina Crosby writes that difference and history replaced identity as the buzzwords of women's studies. She states that, "it would seem that dealing with differences is *the* project of women's studies today" and that feminists must constantly question their most powerful terms (131). Insofar as this thesis project focuses on collaboration across perceived and asserted differences, I hope that the recognition of difference *tout court* is never perceived as the end in and of itself and that any posited differences are recognized as constructed through fraught relationships affected by various power imbalances. As Crosby asserts, "the question remains of how to deal with difference and how to work for difference – how to think difference as a problem for theory and not a solution" (139). As I explain in the rest of this paragraph, in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," the narrator thinks about how she and Eng Kim are different, and how history has affected the roles they are offered in the present global moment.

way of accounting for such spectral overshadowing, without surrendering to the ghost" (212). In the context of "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," any potential solidarity between the narrator and Eng Kim is haunted by the hungry ghosts of the history of British colonial administration in Malaysia, and specifically by the narrator's family's implication therein. The narrator struggles to account for "such spectral overshadowing" by considering her mother's legacy, voicing her disdain for her colonial connections, and seeking community across difference. "Surrendering to the ghost" in her case might mean denying the presence of the past, or being paralysed by guilt (Khanna 209). Khanna's use of the ghost metaphor overlaps provocatively with Marlatt's to suggest that the "hungry ghosts" of the narrative might be very well be the ghost of the colonial past, ready to consume present-day attempts at reconciliation.

One way of denying such ghosts and moving toward an articulation of complicity is to speak in terms of locationality, and expanding on this idea connects back to the narrator's focus on place, discussed at the outset of this chapter. I mentioned above that Susan Stanford Friedman argues that attention to space and to spatial metaphors may contribute to an understanding of gender as a shifting and interacting identity category. Friedman mentions numerous theorists who have embraced space-based rhetoric, from Michel Foucault, who predicted that the contemporary era would be the "epoch of space," to Adrienne Rich's 1984 "Notes Toward a Politics of Locations," to the more recent work of James Clifford, Gayatri Spivak, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (Friedman "Locational" 18-26, *Mappings* 110-114). As I noted above, there are those who hesitate to support the spatial metaphors of positionality and location to articulate identity (Miller 180). However,

given the quantity of scholars who Friedman identifies with spatial metaphorics, it seems evident that there is indeed a trend toward such language, as well as a fairly common faith in its capacity to facilitate discussion around identities and their interactions. Notably, Rich's concept of a "politics of location" has been taken up by numerous other feminists; as mentioned above, I return to a more thorough investigation of her influential phrase in my fourth chapter.

In the context of third-wave feminism, Friedman defines such discussions according to a "new geographics of identity" which:

> figures identity as a historically embedded site, a positionality, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a web, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges. It articulates not the organic unfolding of identity but rather the mapping of territories and boundaries, contours and topographies, the dialectical terrains of inside/outside or center/margin, the axial intersections of different positionalities, and the spaces of dynamic encounter – the 'contact zone,' the 'middle ground,' the borderland, *la frontera.* (21)[94]

Certain elements of this definition of the "new geographics of identity" resonate soundly with Marlatt's narrator's exploration of her complicity: she thinks about the "historically embedded" nature of her identity, and it's "intersection" with other realities according to different "territories and boundaries." The evocation of "inside/outside" is also interesting in this context, given the text's focus on the literal house, the "private hedges," and the liminal walkway. Many of the photographs throughout "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts"

[94] The use of the word "standpoint" in this quote brings to mind feminist standpoint theory which, insofar as it relies on the notion of a discernable women's "standpoint," has been critiqued as essentialist by feminists more aligned with postmodernism. But standpoint theory has evolved and nuanced itself since it was first defined by Nancy Hartsock in 1983 and it is alert to ideas of intersectionality and the fluidity of identity in ways that allow me to feel comfortable using this quote in relation to Marlatt, who is more easily recognizable as a postmodern feminist (Hartsock "Feminist"). Sandra Harding is responsible for some of the most comprehensive coverage of the controversies of standpoint theory and it was she who first who popularized the use of the term to signify a general trend in feminist theory toward situating knowledge in women's experiences (Naples).

emphasize the spatial dimensions of the narrator's inquiry, such as the picture of the house surrounded by trees (52), the "open" windows screened with metalwork (68), the sunny window in the dark, symmetrical dining room (86), and, of course, the servants' walkway (89). These place-based metaphorics, as well as the literal attention to geographical place in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts," relate to the transnational feminist call to examine complicity. Kaplan articulates that call this way: "For the first world feminist critic, therefore, the challenge at this particular time is to develop a discourse that responds to the power relations of the world system, that is, to examine her location in the dynamic of centers and margins" ("Deterritorializations" 189). Once again, the language of "location" is employed, further evidence of the links between transnational feminist strategy, the narrator's anti-colonial place-based focus, and her articulation of her complicity.

I have been suggesting throughout this chapter that the narrator in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" is encountering situations and issues that are at the heart of transnational feminist theory. My intention is not to validate the utility of Marlatt's text, nor is it to prove that Marlatt was avant-garde to be writing of such issues in 1979 – although these two motivations probably inform my engagement with her text on some level. Ultimately what I find most fruitful in this exercise is to note how issues often treated "theoretically" (of complicity, class positioning, colonial legacy, etc.) are played out in this creative text and might therefore be presented and perceived differently than they are in essayistic prose.[95] Individual sections of the text such as those quoted throughout this chapter invite readers

[95] As Coral Ann Howells has speculated in the context of her own work on Canadian women writers: "Novels and short stories do what theory cannot do, for they deal with particularities of individual experience, problematizing theoretical issues by writing in the instabilities which are the very conditions of knowing" (4-5).

and critics to spend time noticing repetition, word play, contradictions and allusions – many of which relate to complex transnational feminist themes that would be theorized in later decades. Marlatt's generic choices mirror her thematic preoccupations; that is, she is concerned with difference, multiplicity and inter-discursivity, and these concerns are reflected in the text's multi-genre composition. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the blurring of genres is, according to Marlatt, a productive mode of writing employed especially by women (*Reading* 24, 208). "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" is a collage of different genres and tones, all of which are informed by autobiography, which is fitting given the narrator's desire to examine her personal, historical complicity in oppression. Joanne Saul identifies Marlatt's *Ghost Works* as a "biotext," a term first coined by George Bowering and employed by Fred Wah to describe his *Diamond Grill* (Saul *Writing* 4, Wah ix). Saul argues that the generic ambiguity of biotexts parallels their insistence on the complexity of subjectivity: "by writing texts that question traditional generic boundaries, by articulating their multiple sites of belonging, and by self-consciously insisting on their positioning throughout their works, these writers provide more flexible accounts of subject formation" (Saul "Displacement" 269). Saul's assessment is astute; I would add that for Marlatt's case in particular, it is productive to link the biotextual aspects of her writings with transnational feminism, in order to imagine how her strategies problematize gender in relation to other identity categories while working toward collaboration across difference. The biotext, collage, and other multigeneric modes are easily linked with literary postmodernism; I choose, however, to emphasize the coherence (and perhaps inevitability?) of such strategies as they relate to the themes of the work, and

as they may be seen not only as literary strategies but as concordant with transnational feminisms.

My reading of "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" arises out of the questions that I bring to the text, even as I feel that the text lends itself to these kinds of queries. I ask: how does Marlatt's narrator conceive of her complex connections with other women? How are colonialism, postcolonialism, globalization and transnationalism present in the text, and how are those presences gendered? How does the text speak to the difficulties and possibilities for collaboration across difference, which is the goal of transnational feminism? What literary strategies does Marlatt use to depict the ambiguities and slipperiness of these issues? A variety of transnational feminist strategies come to the forefront as these questions are answered. For instance, as differently-located women interact with each other and produce transnational feminist discourse, they can choose to be attentive to the dangers of group labels, such as "colonizer," "colonized," or "memsahib." Marlatt's text proposes such an outlook through the ambivalences present in her portrayal of various characters. Similarly, the spatial metaphorics that Marlatt employs can help to foster an awareness of the fluctuating and interrelated nature of identity categories, suggesting that women alert to difference may want to be especially aware of space-based language. The use of spatial metaphorics relates to Marlatt's attention to place – and in particular to the place of Penang and of her childhood house. The lesson to take away from this element of the text may be that despite the homogenizing effects of global capitalism, local sites remain distinct, with their own specific manifestations of the interconnectivity of the past and the present, the colonial and the postcolonial, as perceived differently by

different subjects and different moments in time. Transnational feminism must address the influence of the colonial past on present-day connections, as Marlatt's narrator does when she considers the gendered legacy of her mother, or the potentials for her relationship with Eng Kim. These considerations inevitably lead her to grapple with her complicity, an important part of transnational feminist strategies. Ultimately, "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" has much to say about the desire to connect across difference, as well as the difficulties of making such connections. The difficulties may be addressed, and potentially overcome, through creative approaches that move beyond prescribed boundaries, just as Marlatt's text slides between genres to form a striking and pertinent collage.

Chapter Four : "What Would We Create?" : Dionne Brand and Adrienne Rich in Conversation

"There are two kinds of forces that bridge huge spaces of difference. One is solidarity, the recognition that we need to join with others unlike ourselves to undo the conditions and policies we find mutually intolerable, perhaps for different reasons. This is something more powerful and equalizing than sympathy. The other force is the involuntary emotional connection felt with other human beings, in some unforeseen moment, that can move us out from old automatic affiliations and loyalties into a new and difficult comradeship."
– Adrienne Rich, "Some Questions from the Profession" (Arts 131)

Conversational Collaboration

"What would we create?" asks Karen Brodine in her poem "June 78," "if we knew the powers / of this country moved to provide for us and for all people"? (Rich *What* 14). "What would we create?" asks Adrienne Rich, in her essay of this title (with the citation from Brodine as epigraph), an essay full of her unflinching reflections on American national despair, violence and selective democracy, and the possibilities of political poetry (Rich *What* 14). "What would we create?" asks Dionne Brand in a 1993 letter to Rich, referencing Rich's essay and inviting her into a collaborative project resulting in the documentary film *Listening for Something…: Adrienne Rich and Dionne Brand in Conversation*. Brand signs this particular letter "yours in sisterhood and struggle," evoking a solidarity between the two women that will manifest itself on-screen when the film is released in 1996. Whereas Brodine and Rich are referring specifically to their American

contexts when they ask "What would we create?", the "sisterhood" that Brand evokes spans national borders: she is writing from Canada, an immigrant from Trinidad, and reading Rich's essay, she explains, in light of the ten year anniversary of the toppling of the Grenada revolution. There are questions implicit behind the repeated query "What would we create?": what are the circumstances imagined in the conditional "would"? What kind of "creation"? And of course, the question so crucial to contemporary feminist discussion around essentialism and transnationalism: who is "we"? Reading *Listening for Something…* as a manifestation of transnational feminist poetic collaboration, this chapter examines the "we" presented in the film. Going beyond noting their dis/agreements on the various issues that surface during their discussions, I describe the portrait of collaboration that emerges from the way the film is constructed, which includes the visuals, the content of their conversations, and especially the way that their poetic excerpts are organised to speak to and echo one another. At times the poems illustrate what the poets are discussing; at other moments they call attention to the discussions' silences or gaps, even seeming to resist the order imposed on them by the editing and organization of the film. My analysis of these aspects provides a critical evaluation of this rarely-discussed documentary, but also engages with poetry and prose from a variety of these writers' collections and considers their positioning as North American women poets engaging in a transnational, collaborative artistic project.

The "sisterhood" that Brand names is tangible in the film through the poets' thoughtful enunciation and negotiation of commonality and difference, not so much a strategic essentialism as a radically conversational solidarity. "Conversational" might seem

a rather flat and diminutive adjective to describe their collaboration – hence my addition of the modifier "radically." It is true that conversation has been one of the most popular metaphors for women's literary collaborations and that it can give the impression of an exchange that is casual, conciliatory, and governed by social convention (Laird 5, York 21). Contemporary women collaborators have experimented with a variety of images to symbolize their co-writing, including metaphors of quilting, cooking, musical duets, sibling relationships, stew, salad, card-playing, flying, coin-tossing, dance and choreography (Estes and Lant 160, Stone and Thompson 24, York 5, Authers and Beverley).[96] Lorraine York reads the "tussle over finding apt metaphors for collective creativity" as a reminder of the dynamic, unclassifiable nature of the range of collaborative relationships (4-5). She sees this "tussle" as evidence of the almost undefinable nature of collaboration (4).[97] While emphasizing that there is no satisfactory single definition for collaboration, York nonetheless proposes one: for the purposes of her study "collaboration will mean any overt co-authorship or co-signature of a work of art" (4). So although I make use of York's research to contextualize the metaphorics of *Listening for Something…*, it is uncertain whether or not the film could figure under York's definition of collaboration. The descriptive sub-title of the film (*Adrienne Rich and Dionne Brand in Conversation*) signals a kind of co-authorship but the credits list Brand as "Director," with Miume Jan Eramo as "Associate Director/Editor", and Adrienne Rich as "Artistic Consultant."[98] Because the film

[96] Given the subject matter of this chapter, it is interesting to note that in their article on lesbian collaboration, Estes and Lant describe their indebtedness to Adrienne's Rich's concept of feminist "re-vision," which they cultivate as a fundamental skill fostered by their collaborative work (166-167).

[97] "Tussle" is an interesting verb choice, as its connotations of violence (wrestling, scuffling, pulling, contending, struggling see "Tussle") seem decidedly un-collaborative. *Or*, perhaps tussling is an inevitable part of any sincere collaboration, however much the final product might gloss over the tussles of its process!

[98] This division of tasks and titles implicitly and perpetually complicates the way that I describe the film throughout this chapter. When I refer to the way that "they" construct the documentary, I am speaking of Rich

presents Rich and Brand reading their own poetry it could be discussed in terms of intertextuality, rather than collaboration. However, "airtight distinctions between collaboration and intertextual dialogue are difficult to sustain in practice" (Stone and Thompson 23) to the extent that texts that insist on intertextual allusion "suggest the collaborative nature of texts in general" (York 144) (extending even to my own text here as a further collaborative addition!). To what ends, then, do I read this film as an instance of collaboration, and why employ the rather staid metaphor of conversation?

To begin with, conversation is the metaphor most obviously suggested by the film because, as its sub-title specifies (*Adrienne Rich and Dionne Brand in Conversation*), *Listening for Something…* shows Brand and Rich having literal conversation on various subjects and against numerous backdrops. Beyond this, however, the film is constructed in such a way as to place their interspersed poetic excerpts in conversation with each other, and in conversation with their recorded discussions. As this chapter will demonstrate, the poetic readings have been edited and ordered around the discussions in a way that invites the viewer to hear/see the poets *and* their writings in conversation. Although they are not co-writers of a new collaboratively-produced poetic piece, their conversations do give rise to a new creative object – the film itself. It is therefore most appropriately viewed as a collaborative project. In this sense, the film corresponds to Thomas Hines's definition of collaboration, which is also the one endorsed by Marjorie Stone and Judith Thompson in their study *Literary Couplings*. For them, collaboration is simply "work artists do together

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and Brand, but always with reservation, as it is impossible to know who made the decisions and changes resulting in the final cinematic product. Resarch into this aspect of the collaboration could be fascinatingly facilitated by consulting the information about the film and the unedited conversations, presumably held in the author's respective archives.

to produce a joint creation" (Stone and Thompson 22). The presentation of their individual works in conversation, therefore, results in a co-creation, and I read that creation in these terms – of conversational collaboration.

In the context of this dissertation there is an even more compelling reason to analyse the film in terms of conversational collaboration. In reading about collaboration and its metaphorics, it becomes clear that the questions at the heart of collaboration theory resonate profoundly with the questions at the heart of contemporary anti-essentialist and transnational theory; they are also the questions addressed by *Listening for Something*... and the questions that bring us back to the "we" of "what would we create?" These are questions about the place of difference within collectivity, how it functions and how it is represented. In collaboration theory, these questions surface when critics read the way that differences between collaborators – their individual voices – are manifest in their creation or hidden behind a façade of unity. Holly Laird describes the rich interplay between difference and commonality inherent in collaborative work: "Collaboration ultimately assumes a crossing between differences and samenesses; it issues in and through what are, by turns, troubled, rhapsodic, torn, pleasurable realizations of difference within sameness, of sameness amid difference" (6, London 78). While Laird presents difference and sameness as realities that are in constant negotiation, York reminds readers that difference is seen to inform collaboration in various ways and is valued differently depending on one's perspective (19-20). For many commentators on collaboration, "common ground" is the ultimate goal of collaborative work and differences are meant to be resolved or negotiated on the way to harmony, whereas York hopes to explore collaborative difference as it

indicates dissonance or "unshared human reality" (20). Similar questions – about difference and collaboration – are important to contemporary feminist thought and were especially prominent in the 1990s, when *Listening for Something*... was produced.[99]

Rey Chow credits poststructuralist theory as having ushered in this "era of difference" through its "unsettling of the stability of referential meaning, what had been presumed to be anchored in the perfect fit between the signifier and the signified" (128).[100] In collaboration theory, the "difference revolution" that Chow describes is evident in research such as York's. She does not assume that a co-authored text signifies a unified collaborative voice or an easy joint writing process; in fact, difference, dissonance and the "unshared" are given priority in her research. For feminists, the impact of the "difference revolution" is particularly notable in the destabilization of the signifier "woman," which I discussed in my first and second chapters. However, it is crucial to note that "difference" has become a key concept in feminist thought not only via the poststructuralist theory of Chow's difference revolution but also, even especially, because of feminists of different races, classes and sexualities who destabilized "woman" from their own perspectives. Broadly speaking, however, both feminism and collaboration theory are interested in how difference operates between people who are attempting to create something together,

[99] References to particular feminists working on these questions are peppered throughout this dissertation, particularly in the first and second chapters.

[100] Drawing on the insights of Pheng Cheah, Chow observes that such a prioritization of that which is different or unstable is a major manifestation of the "difference revolution" which "valorized or even idealized… what is different, mobile, contingent, indeterminable" (134). Chow points to the work of Stuart Hall to demonstrate that for some, the difference revolution has permitted a radical and laudable rethinking of identity politics; in other instances, however, Chow argues that "once transposed into sociocultural and/or geopolitical terrains, the poststructuralist specialization in difference, a revolution on its own terms, appears quite inadequate" (134). This point is particularly interesting in the context of this dissertation because Chow uses the example of Canadian multicultural policy (as analysed by Smaro Kamboureli and Marlene Nourbese Philip) to suggest that the rhetoric of the difference revolution can be mobilized even to "mask and perpetuate the persistent problems of social inequality" (133). I discuss these operations of Canadian multicultural policy in my fifth chapter.

whether it be a piece of literature or a social movement. York considers how difference operates within collaboration, which has often been figured as a "safe place of fusion, of affirmative union, and monovocality" (7). For too long, "woman" was also assumed to signify fusion, union and monovocality until anti-essentialist feminists countered such assumptions. Because of these overlapping conversations in the realms of literary collaboration and feminist identities, the idea of conversational collaboration provides a compelling approach to *Listening for Something…*, a work that inevitably participates in both conversations.

Reading Rich and Brand's collaboration as a metaphorical conversation allows their audience to imagine their stance on these questions of difference and commonality, and also showcases the way that they negotiate difference and common ground between themselves, with the poetic excerpts demonstrating, enriching, and exposing those negotiations. Rather than dismissing the metaphor of conversation because it is slightly banal and probably over-used (Laird 5, York 21), conversation emerges as a productive metaphor for across-difference feminist collaboration because it underscores the dialogic process of co-creation without suggesting that the two voices collapse into one (Stone and Thompson 25). The construction of the film emphasizes (as does its title) that conversation involves both speaking and listening (a crucial point for the *Telling It* participants discussed in my second chapter). The hour-long film is comprised of twenty-one scenes of Rich and Brand in conversation, alternating with twenty readings of poetic excerpts (ten from each poet) so that there is an on-going, balanced, back-and-forth movement – a conversation – between the poems, between the poems and the discussions, and between Rich and Brand.

Their discussions are set in or outside a house, most often at the kitchen table (with books and coffee cups suggesting that viewers are privy to an edited version of a long, comfortable exchange) or outside in patio chairs (where they sit comfortably, dressed casually, implying a degree of familiarity and intimacy). The camera regularly zooms in on the face of one poet as she listens to the other, thereby valorizing both sides of the listening/talking binary of conversation. Brand's careful attention to the implications of the zoom ("the eye") of cinematography in her essay "Seeing" confirms that such a technique does indeed harbour an intentional message (*Bread* 181-183). During the third segment of discussion, the camera is positioned as if it were on Brand's shoulder and Rich is visible only as seen from Brand's viewpoint, as if to underscore the importance of perspective and positioning not only in cinematography but in their topics of conversation. During the second segment, they stand facing one another – somewhat awkwardly, it seems – in a large doorframe. Their physical awkwardness suggests that this shot has been staged not to suggest the comradeship of the kitchen table or patio decors but to evoke the metaphorics of the doorframe, an image they both explore in their work.[101] Their awkwardness in the doorway also offers an image of the discomfort that can result from the tensions of collaborative work.[102] Whether in the kitchen, on the patio, or in another room of the house,

[101] The image of the doorframe is recurring in Brand's work, especially in her more recent publications: for instance, *Thirsty* begins and ends by evoking a "doorway" ("let me declare doorways" and "I wake up to it, open as doorways" 1, 63) and also depicts the doorway as a site of violence and grief (16, 21, 26, 43, 50). See Jody Mason's article "Searching for the Doorway: Dionne Brand's *Thirsty*." *A Map to the Door of No Return* constitutes a lengthy investigation of the doorway as a point of rupture, a point in history, and as metaphor for place (5, 18, 24). Rich explores doorframe imagery in connection with immigration in her poem "Prospective Immigrants Please Note" (*Collected* 188) and the doorframe is also a central metaphor for the relationship between art and suffering in her poem "The Fact of a Doorframe." In her 1984 collection also entitled *The Fact of a Doorframe*, this poem is found on the first page of the volume, before the title page. Langdell reads this doorframe as Rich's transition into a new kind of poetry and a new understanding of gender (159).

[102] Interestingly, in this particular case, Rich seems physically uncomfortable leaning on the doorframe, perhaps as a result of her severe arthritis. In her essay "Dearest Arturo," Rich writes to Arturo: "We're both different generations, cultures, genders; we're both gay, both disabled, both writers; and that has helped in our

the visuals of their conversations highlight the fact that they are two *individuals* (with different "viewpoints", as in the literal "points" from which they "view" each other and the world) conversing *together* (occupying the same space as they interact).[103] That is, the visuals resonate with the dynamic that I trace in both collaboration and feminist theory: the question of togetherness (the "we") and its individual (different) components.

My analysis of *Listening for Something…*'s radically conversational collaboration parallels the flow of the film. I suggest that the twenty-one discussion segments and twenty poetic excerpts can be perceived in four distinct movements. In the first quarter, Rich and Brand are concerned with their politics of location and geographical positionings. They debate the relationship between women and nationhood while Brand reads segments from "No Language is Neutral" and Rich from "An Atlas of the Difficult World." In the second quarter and third quarters, the focus shifts to the complex interplay of the personal and the political in their poetics, as they discuss both international politics and lesbian sexuality. They discuss their divergent impressions of communism and the connection between economic systems and women's liberation. Brand brings in material from *Chronicles of a Hostile Sun* and Rich reads from "For Ethel Rosenberg." Then Brand reads from her long poem "Hard Against the Soul" and Rich from her "Origins and History of Consciousness"

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friendship" (*What* 22). Rich's disability is not mentioned in *Listening for Something…*, although it may possibly be in evidence in this doorframe shot. Because disability is not something that Rich has in common with Brand (as she does with Arturo), does it remain unmentioned in the film because the film is more invested in their similarities?

[103] The settings for their conversations are intensely domestic, which is interesting in the context of collaboration theory: "feminist collaborators and theorists have often turned to domestic metaphors, such as cooking and quilting to preserve the sense of an interactive creativity that mingles individual and collective energies." (Stone and Thompson 24) As mentioned above, I read the domesticity of the setting as underscoring the conversational nature of their collaboration. Given the long-standing association between women and the domestic sphere, this setting becomes ironic as the poets discuss personal *and* intensely political subjects.

as they recall what it was like to write poetry before they publicly identified as lesbian. This leads into a discussion on how women are depicted in literature, how women learn to express their desire, and how they have been influenced by the grandmotherly figures of their pasts. In the final quarter of the documentary, the excerpts that Brand reads from "No Language is Neutral," as well as Rich's section from "Inscriptions," supplement the discussion they have about their intentions as writers cognizant of the slipperiness of language. There are no obvious breaks or cues to suggest that the film be read according to this four-part schema but I contend that it is has been edited and constructed in a way that enables me to use these four main themes (location, politics, sexuality and language) as lenses through which to recognize and interrogate the differences and commonalities between these two poets. These four broad subjects, along with the very concepts of difference and commonalities, are among the most important keywords for the entire *oeuvres* of Dionne Brand and Adrienne Rich, making it absolutely fitting to discuss their collaboration in/through these terms.[104]

Listening for Something… begins with quotations from their pre-film letters scrolling up a black screen and contextualizing the documentary. In one passage, from a letter dated January 28, 1994, Rich expresses her enthusiasm for the film project and imagines that it will "embody a kind of exchange between poets who are different in generation, race and class." Her use of the verb "embody" is fitting, given that much of their conversation explores the ways that bodies are raced, sexed, classed, objectified,

[104] In this paragraph I have provided the titles of the poems that are read in the film. The poets do not name the poems on-screen, but the video jacket provides a list of "Poetry in the film (in order read)" with the bibliographical information for each collection of poetry. While working on this chapter, I found it useful to photocopy the segments of each poem read in the film and to then arrange them in order of appearance, effectively creating a homemade textual version of Brand and Rich's poetic collaboration.

desired, violated and represented. “Exchange” is a telling noun as well, foreshadowing the balanced, back-and-forth, conversational organisation of the film. Rich’s comment also suggests that what is potentially most worthwhile or exciting about their collaboration is the fact that it will happen across their numerous differences. Indeed, this quotation is included at the beginning of the film and is also printed in bold on the promotional sleeve for the documentary, indicating that this aspect of its content is perhaps its most valuable characteristic. The fact that Brand and Rich are speaking and listening across racial and national borders is certainly what incited me to consider this film in the context of this dissertation project and it is one of the film’s most instructive and intriguing attributes. Another (more cynical) way to interpret this would be to say that the film markets itself with the consideration of difference as its biggest potential selling point. However, given the fact that this National Film Board Studio D production was surely never expected to turn a large profit, and given that Brand and Rich are unabashedly anti-capitalist in their recorded discussions, it would be hasty to accuse them of capitalizing on their differences for the sake of profit. Yet it seems revelatory to notice the angle that is taken when Rich’s comment about difference is prioritized. That is, this film could be described in a way that underscores their sameness: as a collaboration between two contemporary, North American, lesbian, feminist, political, well-respected poets and essayists. Or, it could be described in the opposite way: as a collaboration across race, across the Canadian/American border, across the North/South border, and across generations. The content and construction of the film invites viewers to consider how these poets present themselves as different in relation to one another and how they posit their similarities in

relationship with one another. Although this is a project that describes itself as an "exchange between poets who are different" the film contains no awkward silences or tense disagreements, a fact that testifies both to the tremendous work that Rich and Brand accomplish together and also to the gaps in their conversation, gaps that their poetic readings collaboratively expose and question.

Politics of Locations

Listening for Something… begins with the most obvious disparity of opinion that Brand and Rich present throughout the documentary. The film opens with an *in medias res* conversation on national belonging. The poets are discussing one of the most oft-cited quotes[105] from Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*: "As a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world" (129). Rich expresses her concern, as she does in her essay "Blood, Bread, and Poetry," that these words might be taken out of context "to justify a false transcendence, an irresponsibility toward the cultures and geopolitical regions in which we are rooted" (*Arts* 57). In conversation with Brand, Rich worries that Woolf's words might be used to invoke a false sense of international "womanhood" that fails to grapple with the implications and privileges of different citizenships. Rich's wariness towards the Woolf citation clearly has to do with a possible misreading that it might elicit. In the context of *Three Guineas*, Woolf's 1938 feminist and antifascist manifesto, these words belong to Woolf's imagined

[105] In her introduction to the recent annotated edition of *Three Guineas*, Jane Marcus notes the popularity of this quote (liii). She argues that it must be understood in light of Marx's influence on Woolf, who "defines the statelessness that Marx attributed to the working class as the condition of women" (liii).

"outsider," a woman who has realized her extreme disenfranchisement from her society and nation (127-129). Cognizant of the "facts" of England's treatment of women, and thus firmly "indifferent" to the cause of war, the outsider tells her brother (who purports to fight for their common benefit) that patriotism is an impossibility for her because she has been so completely barred from English citizenship and ownership (127-129). Although Woolf did subscribe to a kind of internationalism,[106] in *Three Guineas* she is clearly engaged in a sustained feminist and socialist interrogation of English citizenship as it is being mobilized for violence. Rather than belittling or ignoring the category of nationhood, as in the misreading that Rich fears, this particular quote shows Woolf demonstrating the way that nationalism has excluded women even as it calls on them for support. While Rich counters this imagined misreading, Brand embraces the Woolf quote, arguing that it is accurate and helpful because the very concept of "nation" is based on corruption and exclusion and is not useful for women. Brand would say, along with Woolf's outsider, "As a woman I have no country," meaning that for her, the concept of nationhood can hardly be recuperated; in fact, Brand would say this even more emphatically than Woolf, who does frame her arguments in terms of national critique whereas Brand works from a diasporic, transnational perspective. As for Rich, it is nearly impossible to imagine her speaking in unison with Woolf's outsider. Her work can certainly be read in the tradition of Woolf, in that her writing often performs national critique, but she is ultimately wary of the outsider's proclamation. She lingers over the facts of her own (American) citizenship and is highly

[106] Marcus notes that Woolf "what suspicious of all nationalisms and maintained the internationalism of her mentors Jane Ellen Harrison and Margaret Llewelyn Davies" (liii).

engaged and critical, operating from a certain sense of belonging and ownership that Woolf's outsider does not claim.

Although Brand and Rich do not discuss the original context of the Woolf quote or acknowledge that it belongs to Woolf's imagined "outsider," Brand suggests an insider/outsider binary when she describes her antipathy and even hatred of the United States of America. She tells Rich that she has "no concept" of what it would be like to be "on the inside, to have a sense of belonging" in the US. With an almost apologetic smile, Rich replies, "This is my country." Her response is a direct echo of section II of her "An Atlas of the Difficult World." Included in this first part of the film, the poem begins "Here is a map of our country," and, employing the poetic technique of anaphora, continues with eight repetitions of "This is" as the poet points to specific locales (*Atlas* 6). Her use of the possessive adjectives "my" and "our" to modify "country" is particularly interesting given the engagement with Woolf's outsider, whose reflections are catalyzed by the question "What does 'our country' mean to me an outsider?" (127). Brand is quick to identify with the outsider – so quick that it seems provocative, as if she wants to challenge Rich's sense of (critical) national belonging, or at least distance herself from it. Interspersed throughout this exchange on women and nationalism are the first six poetic readings of the film. These particular poetic excerpts are full of markers of place (spatial nouns like here, there, nowhere) placed in relation to first-person voices (personal and possessive pronouns such as I, our, we). The readings surround, echo and supplement the conversation as the poets position themselves differently in terms of geography and geopolitics. Set at the beginning of the documentary as Rich and Brand discuss national belonging, these poems highlight

the resonances and divergences in their respective politics of locations. In fact, my reading suggests that the poems flesh out and elucidate the poets' different reactions to the Woolf quote by highlighting their different historical, racial and national positions – positions that are assumed but unarticulated as they discuss Woolf.

It is impossible to speak of a "politics of location" without crediting Adrienne Rich herself, whose essay "Notes toward a Politics of Location" was given as a talk in 1984 and first published in 1985. In her "Notes" Rich interrogates Woolf's famous statement and questions her own formerly-held opinions on women's common oppression and automatic solidarity (*Arts* 63-64). Her politics of location are about investigating what it means to be in a body in a place on a map that is "also a place in history" (64, 67). She writes specifically about questioning her own white privilege and calls on the "white women's movement" to examine its racial positioning, ending with the question "who is *we*?" (67, 71, 81, 82). This essay, and Rich's work in general, has been hugely influential in the anti-essentialist critique of the mainstream feminist movement. Transnational feminists such as Caren Kaplan and Chandra Talpade Mohanty pick up on the term "politics of location" in their work as well (Kaplan 138; Mohanty "Feminist" 68). Peter Dickinson's work on Brand includes an overview of feminist and postcolonial reconsiderations of Rich's term (156-160). Notably, he mentions Michele Wallace, whose criticisms of Rich have been especially vehement; Dickinson himself is also a partial detractor (158-159).[107] Although it is not universally praised, the concept of a "politics of location" represents one of Rich's crucial contributions to contemporary feminist thought. Indeed, Cheri Colby Langdell goes

[107] In some ways, Dickinson's thoughts on Brand provide a partial precedent for my work here because he reads Brand's politics of location via Rich's original conception of the term and its subsequent manifestations in transnational feminist theory from Mohanty and Kaplan (156-158).

so far as to claim that "It would be practically impossible to teach women's studies, feminist theory, or feminist criticism anywhere in the world without reference to Adrienne Rich's poetry and prose" (234). Consequently, I have occasion to mention Rich numerous times throughout this dissertation. When I borrow (and pluralize) her term "politics of location(s)" in order to discuss how Brand and Rich situate themselves through the conversational poetics of *Listening for Something*..., I am suggesting that the first six poems, along with their conversations, are invested in the representation – and even the comparison – of their different locations because the poets both believe in the necessity of articulating one's location… albeit from different locations. The construction and content of the film implies that self-situating happens in conversation and as a grounds for further discussion, and that self-situating means thinking through the positioning of "this body" [108] in a geographical and historical place. Furthermore, this self-situating and thinking-through happens to a large extent in their poetry and in the conversation between the poetic excerpts – with the poems illuminating the conversation and often demonstrating their differences well beyond the scope of their talk.

So where and who are these poetic voices – and what are the politics of this exchange? Poetry enters into the film through readings from the first and seventh sections of Brand's long poem "No Language is Neutral," in which the "I" remembers haunting the beach, looking for escape, and then arrives in Canada (*No Language* 22, 28). The next four excerpts are from the first, third, and fifth sections of Rich's "An Atlas of the Difficult

[108] Rich: "Perhaps we need a moratorium on saying 'the body.' For it's also possible to abstract 'the' body. When I write 'the body,' I see nothing in particular. To write 'my body' plunges me into lived experience, particularity… This body. White, female; or female, white. The first obvious, lifelong facts…The politics of location. Even to begin with my body I have to say that from the outset that body had more than one identity" (*Arts* 67).

World" (*An Atlas* 3-6, 12), a long poem that has been characterized as an investigation of the location, privileges and complexity of loving the United States while hating much of its national policy (Langdell 190). "No language is neutral," Brand reads/writes, immediately situating herself in the anti-colonial Caribbean with this well-documented intertextual allusion to Derek Walcott that challenges his conception of the breadth of the English language (Sanders x, Wiens 82-83, Brand "Interview" 15). In the context of the film, however, this opening statement acts as an invitation to viewers to be alert to the non-neutrality of all that will follow. The curt, declarative, absolute tones of "no language is neutral" instantly give way to the "I" ("I used to haunt the beach…") and contrast with the long, winding, descriptive "sentence" that flows over the next ten lines of the poem and mirrors the "swift undertow" of the river being described (Brand *No Language* 22). Leslie Sanders recognizes this as one of Brand's distinctive tropes, referring to "the poet's typical characteristic sentences that sweep the reader along, clause after clause, in waves of language" (xi). The first "here" of "No Language is Neutral" is the beach at Guaya and the two rivers that lead to it, from where the "I" longed to leave. At the centre of the poem (positioned in the middle, like the "country sand" that the two rivers "sentinel") the spatial noun "here" is thrice repeated in as many lines, including twice in the only phrase that comes close to sounding as short, punchy and declarative as the opening "no language is neutral": "Here was beauty / and here was nowhere" (*No Language* 22).

This opening reading by Brand situates her in the Caribbean – and not only through the line "No language is neutral." Her "I used to haunt the beach" also recalls Walcott's "Midsummer LII," whose first-person narrator "used to haunt the arches / of the British

barracks of Vigie" (506). Although both haunted locations (Brand's beach at Guaya and Walcott's Vigie barracks) evoke the colonial past, Walcott's narrator frequents structural vestiges of British rule, while Brand's persona chooses a natural landscape imbued with history but also foreshadowing her impending international move into diasporic identity. Brand's declarative and provocative "here was nowhere" likewise resonates with her Caribbean context. The idea of "nowhere" recalls the influential ways that Caribbean history has been described through negation, from Edouard Glissant's concept of "non-history" (Johnson 22, Rody 109) to Walcott's own proclamation about their being "nothing there" (Birbalsingh 24). Maria Caridad Casas also sees Brand as "picking up on a theme in Caribbean literature in which the Caribbean is seen as politically and culturally 'nowhere,'" a theme that she sees most prominently in the essays of V.S. Naipaul (Casas *Multimodality* 169). Brand enters into conversation with the dominant tendency (mostly championed by male writers) to "render Caribbean history as an absence" (Rody 122) or at least as something broken, repressed and unrequited (Johnson 22, Rody 109, 122). As I detail below, "here" for Brand is not only "nowhere" but also "beauty" as well as "history too" (*No Language* 22, 23). But before moving to that analysis, it is important to recognize that as much as Brand's "here was nowhere" contributes to a Caribbean conversation, it also has particular resonances within her Canadian context, especially considering the longevity of Northrop Frye's query "where is here?" in all its subsequent modified manifestations.[109] Sanders makes an explicit connection (which she calls ironic) between Frye's question and

[109] I am thinking of the myriad ways in which Frye's question has been referenced and answered over the years, such as in the title of Peter Dickinson's *Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities and the Literatures of Canada* or in the characterization of Canada's eco-poets as those who ask "What is here?" and "How to be here?" instead of "Where is here?" (M. Dickinson, n.p.).

Brand's work in her introduction to a collection of Brand's poetry (ix). I will return to the issue of Canadian national identity in the film toward the end of this chapter but in terms of the politics of location of *Listening for Something…*, the multi-national resonances of "here was nowhere" remind us that Brand is an author that must necessarily be read within multiple national and transnational contexts. Carol Morrell, for instance, suggests that Brand be read within the literary and political milieus of Canada, Africa and the Black Americas (9). Already this politics of location surrounding her critical reception marks a difference between her and Rich, who is often read in conjunction with American canonical poets such as Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson (Werner 164, 98-105; Langdell 5, 79-87). Although my own consideration of Rich is somewhat transnational because she is in conversation with Brand, Rich is habitually considered within the national boundaries of American literature, whether that be in "oracular tradition of the visionary poets Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson" (Langdell 2) or in the activist vein of Muriel Rukeyser and Audre Lorde (Gilbert 159), as opposed to Brand's work, which lends itself to a diasporic and transnational perspective.

My reading of the transnational resonances of Brand's "here was nowhere" resonates partially with that of Jason Wiens, who asserts that Brand presents the "nowhere"-ness of Trinidad as a comment on the "widely commodified construction" of "the Caribbean as a purely aestheticized nowhere, a site that is not a place, absent of history" (94). But where Wiens seems worried that Brand is somehow endorsing a view of the Caribbean as ahistorical, "paradisical but powerless" (94), I suggest that the colonial history of Trinidad is palpable throughout the poem and its beauty symbolizes all that the

young emigrant – "not knowing" – leaves behind for the anticlimax of "a skyscraper and a concrete eternity" (Brand *No Language* 28). The setting of the beach at Guaya is historically significant given that Guayaguayare was the site first spotted by Christopher Columbus in 1498 and settled by French planters and their slaves in the late 1700's ("Guayaguayare"). It is the colonial history that claimed Trinidad as a Spanish and then British colony that suggests to the poetic "I" that she ought to leave, that this beach is "nowhere" in comparison to elsewhere. "There was history," the poem states, "that taught my eyes to / look for escape even beneath the almond leaves fat / as women, the conch shell tiny as sand, the rock / stone old like water" (Brand *No Language* 22). The use of the adverb "even" as an "intensive or empathetic particle to emphasize the limit of what is possible or probable" ("Even") reveals that the characteristics of the Trinidadian beach (the synecdoche of leaves, shell and rock) might have compelled the "I" to stay, had it not been for history teaching her to look away. The synecdochal items are described through similes but the similes reference elements already internal to this beach and already enumerated in the poem (sand, big women, and water). Once noticed, the message of these similes is powerfully anti-colonial: this beach, this country, this supposed "nowhere" do not need the outside reference for comparison forced upon it by colonial centres. For as much as a consideration of Caribbean history as fragmented non-history may have empowered citizens to grapple with the difficulties of their past, Brand also seems to be suggesting that there is a time to see "here" as beautiful, historical and self-sufficient, and to mourn that that has not been recognized.

Yet for the Caribbean woman of "No Language is Neutral," "the taste of leaving" has already "cut deep" and the beautiful nowhere of "here" gives way to another "here" (Brand *No Language* 22, 28). This moment when the "I" leaves Trinidad for Canada is also the moment when the poem moves into the present tense and the first-person shifts briefly into third-person ("a girl's face" … "her eyes"), implying a moment of disconnection from the self who could have stayed to "pass her eyes on / the red-green humming bird's twitching / back, the blood warm quickened water colours of a / sea bed, not the rain forest tangled in smoke-wet" (28). These images that "she" will never see are lush, sensual and evocative. Far from being an emptily aestheticized landscape or an idealization of the country of origin, this description is meant to contest the supposed "nowhere"-ness of this place, and also to stand in contrast to the new "here" presented in this excerpt only through the anti-climactic phrase "well, there it was" and as the afore-mentioned "skyscraper and a concrete eternity" (28).[110] Arriving in this new "here," the girl is described as she appears on a small (passport?) photograph and the description focuses on specific parts of her body (face, hair, feet, eyes). With the next excerpt of the film, Rich's poetry enters into conversation with this technique as it also describes body parts (hand, wrist, throat). But whereas the body parts of Brand's poem belong specifically to "the girl" as she moves from one "here" to another, the body parts of section one of Rich's "An Atlas of the Difficult World" are preceded by an indefinite article ("a hand") or by definite articles ("the wrist," "the throat") that ironically call attention to the lack of particularity of these nouns (Rich

[110] David Leahy reads the images of concrete in *No Language is Neutral* as the "American-identified materiality of Canada's modernity" that confronts the immigrant narrator. Leahy's work provides another type of transnational reading of Brand's poetry, which he discusses in relation to American, Canadian, Caribbean and Québécois borders.

An Atlas 3). So while "the" is habitually employed when the noun is a particular, identifiable one (often one that has been previously mentioned by the speaker/writer), the "the" preceding wrist and throat actually highlight their lack of referentiality because no specific body has been previously identified. The hand, wrist, and throat belong ostensibly to the exploited workers of American "agribusiness empires" and the disembodied, non-particularity of these body parts emphasizes the exploitation of the fruit pickers (Franzek 69). Indeed, in the landscape of this first poem pieces of humans, technology and nature mingle indiscriminately and move around and against each other as in an elaborate machine. Metal streams (cars on a highway), the freeway has a voice, strawberries bleed, hands pick, planes gurr, eucalyptus, empires, cypress, insecticide (Rich *An Atlas* 3) – and yet the sense of "present-participal on-going action" (Franzek 59) that suggests something mechanic, set in motion and unstoppable, is destabilized by the repetition of the word "communion," which conjures the realm of the sacred and the idea of being in intimate communication. These components *are* in intimate communion, but the intimate communion between the pickers' throats and Malathion holds no sense of the sacredness of life and nature.

This critical portrait of American industrial agriculture is the first "here" that Rich presents in her poetic contribution to *Listening for Something…* and its images, as well as its shorter, slower phrases, are jarringly different from Brand's evocation of the landscapes of home and exile. Rich's second excerpt echoes the repetitions of "here" in "No Language is Neutral." "Here is a map of our country," begins the second section of "An Atlas of a Difficult World," "Here is the Sea of Indifference," and then, "here is where the jobs were"

(*An Atlas* 6). The sense of national belonging that Rich describes in conversation with Brand is evident in her portrayal of "here" as it contrasts to the internationally shifting "here" of Brand's work. Rich's "here" is national, and she offers a "map" of "our" country that spans many regions of the vast United States of America, from southwestern desert missiles to northeastern seatowns (Riley 126). Against a triumphalist, racist, anti-historical and anti-democratic patriotism, Rich's map shows the poverty and violent history of her country's "here." "Here is a map of our country," begins the poem, but the sense of democratic common ownership implied by "our" is absent from the rest of the map, and is echoed only by the identical syllable of "h*our*ly" when the poem describes the "hourly wages and no shares" (that is, no common ownership) involved in "processing frozen fishsticks" (*An Atlas* 6). The poem moves on to name specific locales on the national map, all historically associated with violent confrontation (*An Atlas* 12),[111] as Rich hopes (as she states in "What would we create?") that "the citizens of the United States" might "turn and face the conditions on which this country was founded" (17). Although Brand is also profoundly engaged with maps, oppression and history (especially in her *A Map to the Door of No Return*, published six years after this film), it is difficult to imagine her employing Rich's rhetoric of democratic citizenship and her occasionally didactic tone.

In the midst of these evocations of national, historicized geography comes a section that portrays Rich's narrator's more particular "here."[112] In the excerpt (the final section of

[111] Rich names Appomattox, Wounded Knee, Los Alamos, Selma, and the last airlift from Saigon. William S. Waddell suggests that these would be "familiar names" for "the American reader," who can thereby "supply the circumstances and implications that add depth to Rich's quick, chronological recitation" (92). The Norton Critical Edition of *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose* provides footnotes that explain the historical significance of each of these place names – presumably for the benefit of Rich's un-"American reader"s.
[112] William S. Waddell reads the fact that "the national experience is grounded in that of individual experience" as a manifestation of Rich's "feminist principle and practice" (90).

the first part of "An Atlas")[113] the "I" is in a new place (perhaps a reference to Rich's own move from the east coast to California) and addressing a "you" who has never known her in this new place (*An Atlas* 4-5). In the context of *Listening for Something…* the geographic mobility of Rich's "I" recalls that of Brand's immigrant "I," and yet these mobile selves are portrayed in vastly different relationship with their locations. The poetic excerpts Brand chooses to read at the beginning of the film focus on the conditions that prompt her international move and are heavily invested in grappling with the original "here" in its international, colonial positioning. The domestically relocated "I" of Rich's poem concentrates on her new "here" on the Pacific coast. Brand's narrator haunts the beach, looking out to the ocean, intent on leaving and escape; Rich's narrator is also walking by the ocean but she declares that the "sweep of the great ocean" "eludes" her, "even the curve of the bay, because as always / I fix on the land. I am stuck to earth" (*An Atlas* 5). These contrasting images, set side by side so early in the film, bring to light the differences in the politics of locations of a diasporic writer, sceptical of national allegiance, and a self-described "American poet" (*What* 261) intent on interrogating the conditions of her citizenship and in calling her fellow citizens to do the same. Rich's sense of "fix[ing] on the land" associates her with the American tradition of the frontier, an observation that recalls the figure of the proud, rifle-bearing pioneer woman from Rich's "From An Old House in America" (*Poems* 245). Brand, on the other hand, is engaging with a Caribbean tradition that has been compelled by the ocean; one thinks immediately of the Middle Passage and of

[113] In the printed version of "An Atlas of the Difficult World," the poem begins with the "A dark woman, head bent" piece followed by this "this is where I live now" excerpt and then moving into part two ("here is a map"). In the film, however, this sequence is modified so that the "this is where I live now" part comes after "here is a map." This type of change suggests the care with which the film's poetic excerpts have been ordered around each other and around the poets' conversation so that the result is indeed a new collaborative creation.

Walcott's "The Sea is History" (*Star* 25-28). The fact that Brand's narrator "haunt[s] the beach" while Rich's persona "fix[es] on the land" illuminates the different standpoints that they take in relation to the Woolf quote and further nuances their different politics of location by highlighting the critical, national and literary contexts into which they speak/write. In a sense the poems provide the "background material" that enables a thorough understanding of their conversations and even emphasizes the significant differences between their standpoints.

The title of this documentary film comes from the first line of Rich's "An Atlas of the Difficult World" and it reads, "A dark woman, head bent, listening for something" (*An Atlas* 3) Although it has been suggested that the "dark woman" is one of the poem's exploited strawberry pickers (Knutson 105), in the context of the film, the "dark woman" is more obviously the poet herself, listening to the voices of her place and listening for the possibilities of change (Waddell 91). Intervening as it does in the unfolding of the film and as its title, the excerpt seems to reference Brand as well, suggesting that she is also "a dark woman, head bent, listening for something." Of course the adjective "dark" applies to these women in very different ways. When Brand or the exploited worker are imagined as "the dark woman," the adjective references skin colour and race in a way that it cannot when applied to Rich. Indeed, if "the dark woman" is indeed the exploited worker, she is dangerously close to being an anonymous "Third World Woman," as described (and denounced) by Chandra Talpade Mohanty's influential transnational feminist scholarship (*Feminism* 17-42). The excerpts from *No Language is Neutral* that have been read thus far in the film do reference racial identity via their complex engagement with colonial history

and also through mention of "hair between hot comb and afro" (28) and "not backra white but nigger brown sand" (22) Race also comes up in this first quarter of the documentary when Rich speaks candidly about her white privilege and the years she spent grappling with what it meant to be a white woman in the Southern United States. In fact, the line "A dark woman, head bent, listening for something" (*An Atlas* 3) comes immediately after Rich refers to her racial positioning, so that the audience, if they do identify the listening woman with Rich, would be inclined to note the racial undertones of "dark," especially as Rich is in conversation with a Black poet. The poetics and politics of the adjective "dark," spoken into this particular moment in the documentary, allow me to the broach the subject of their racial difference more blatantly and speculatively than their conversation allows. That is, the poets do not spend time discussing the way race is manifest between them or affects their collaboration. This is strikingly different from the kind of conversation that Rich has had with Audre Lorde, when they identify specific misunderstandings between them that they attribute to their racial difference (*Sister* 103-106). Indeed, at one point Lorde tells Rich that "stereotypically or symbolically these conversations occur in a space of Black woman/white woman where it's beyond Adrienne and Audre" (*Sister* 103). Why don't Brand and Rich engage in similar self-analyses in *Listening for Something…*? It could be that they simply have a different kind of relationship and therefore different kinds of conversation; it could be that they had such discussions but edited them out of the film; it could be that the self-awareness that Lorde and Rich explore in 1979 seems too invested in identity politics and essentialism to be of interest to Brand and Rich in 1995. Whatever the reason, the reverberations of poetic language ("A dark woman, head bent, listening for

something") invite a consideration of racial difference when their conversation does not seem to tarry there.

The poetic excerpts spoken into this first part of the documentary demonstrate the poets' attempt to capture what they observe through their careful "listening," resulting in depictions of their specific locales, as perceived from their different embodied viewpoints. The facts that these poems appear in conversation signals to the viewer that the poets are also "listening" to each other here at the outset of the film as they present and perceive their different locations, one clearly diasporic and the other solidly (though critically) grounded in a particular nation. As such, the poems endorse a methodology of self-positioning as a foundational move toward transnational collaboration. Although I suggest above that their consideration of race could have been more forthright, the radically conversational poetics of their exchange go well beyond the type of trite self-situating found in some humanities criticism (i.e. the inclusion of a token sentence that mentions the critic's race, citizenship, and gender as if readers could thereafter attribute the critic's perspective to that group identity).[114] What Rich and Brand present is a sustained creative engagement with their politics of locations. As much as I have identified the very different "here"s that emerge from the poetic excerpts, Brand and Rich in conversation project an comradely solidarity and are both committed to the depiction and interrogation of their subjectivities and/in their locations. Their methodology of self-situating, therefore, is rooted in the common desire to explore self-situating strategies through poetry and in conversation. Because the poetry

[114] Writing in 1992, Christina Crosby notes that "such specifying statements are now *de rigeur* and serve to locate one implicitly in relation to others, a useful exercise that does guard against certain presumptions of universality." She goes on to critique these "specifying statements" for ultimately eschewing real reflection on the nature of identity and history (137).

grounds their different viewpoints (on the Woolf quote, for example) and calls attention to gaps in their conversation (for instance, around race), their poetic representations of their own politics of locations are invaluable tools for building and understanding their transnational collaboration.

Personal / Political

If the first quarter of the film manifests the poets' mutual commitment to articulating their different politics of locations, the second and third quarters underscore their shared exploration of the complex intermingling of the personal and the political.[115] The poems and discussion through which Rich and Brand situate themselves geographically and nationally are certainly already political; their different geographies evoke colonialism, national histories and economic exploitation. But following Rich's reading from the fifth section of "An Atlas of the Difficult World," the conversation turns explicitly to their opinions on political and economic systems as related to the possibilities of women's liberation. As if to subtly underscore this shift in conversational focus, this is also the moment when the poets are pictured on patio chairs outside the house, mirroring the shift to the "outside" world of politics. Yet the change in setting can only be ironic,

[115] Carol Morrell has discussed Brand's work (along with that of Caribbean-Canadian writers Claire Harris and Marlene Nourbese Philip) in terms of "the old feminist rallying cry 'the personal is political'" (12). Morrell argues that Brand, Harris and Philip "understand and apply the phrase in its original meaning. By understanding one's own experience, one is reaching out, finding that what is personal to oneself is *also* personal to many others, and thus that one's experience is not unique, to be suffered through in isolation, and that the large social patterns that underlie the similarities among the personal experiences of so many are in fact politically, materially, and economically based" (12). I would characterize Brand's work more as a poetics of witness than a "reaching out" although she certainly does deal with the way that shared personal experiences are "politically, materially, and economically based," perhaps especially in the "Pilate was that river" excerpt that I discuss later in this section.

given that the subsequent discussion and poetry subverts binaries of outside/inside and personal/political. Indeed, the patio is a kind of in-between space, akin to the doorframe, because it is outside but still part of the structure of the house. This blurring of inside/outside is analogous to the blurring of private/political. In effect, insofar as the poets discuss political and economic systems through reference to personal anecdote and through "political" poems that portray an intimate "I," they are insisting on the way that the personal is (in)formed by its political and economic contexts. That which is personal and individual infuses their treatment of subjects easily labelled "political." When they subsequently begin to discuss their lesbian sexualities, the personal/political binary is destabilized in the opposite direction: that which is easily labelled "personal" is seen as inescapably political. This section reads the poems and discussions of the middle part of the film in conversation with each other in order to examine how the poetics of Rich and Brand, read conjointly, subvert any facile distinction between the personal and political realms.[116] I pay particular attention to the way that the themes or techniques of one poetic excerpt lead into the next, imitating the flow of an ideal conversation in which each party contributes something that inspires the other further, without necessitating consensus. But I also argue that at certain moments, the poems seem to resist the structure imposed upon them by the film and the poet-narrator's standpoints emerge as radically distinct.

This segment of the film opens with Brand describing why she became a communist at a certain point in her life while Rich explains why she did not.[117] The ordering of the

[116] I am reminded of Spivak's assertion that the "program at least implicit in all feminist activity [is] the deconstruction of the opposition between the public and the private" ("Explanation" 30).
[117] At this point, Rich is explaining her early perceptions of Marxism as influenced by American Cold War propaganda. Her later appreciation of Marx is evident throughout her prose. For example, see *Arts of the Possible* 102, 147, 156.

sequence establishes a parallel between the excerpt that Brand reads from "Diary – The Grenada Crisis" and the portion that Rich reads from her "For Ethel Rosenberg." Perhaps more than any other poetic excerpts in the film, these two are presented as dramatizations of what each poet is describing to the other in their recorded conversation. Both are read over slightly blurry slow-motion footage from mid-twentieth-century newsreels, implying that these poems resonate with each other despite their treatment of different moments in international political history. In addition, their formal qualities, particularly the organization of the lines and verses on the page, are similar and distinguish themselves from the excerpts that have been read thus far in the film. That is, the short lines and short verses of "Diary – The Grenada Crisis" feel out of the ordinary after the dense, paragraph-like spatial organization of the chunks from "No Language is Neutral," just as the short lines and short verses of "For Ethel Rosenberg" are different from the long, mostly left-aligned passages of "An Atlas of the Difficult World." The film's audience obviously does not see the way that the poems are printed on the page but the rhythms of the reading are undoubtedly affected by the spatial organization. It is also interesting to note that both of these poems come from earlier on in each poet's career than those quoted thus far in the film. In fact, both represent touchstone moments in their respective careers. Brand has written numerous times about the impact that her involvement in the Grenada Crisis had on her.[118] Similarly, Rich recalls the importance of the 1950s "fogs of the Cold War" as a formative era in her own evolution as a feminist political poet and she remembers the electrocution of the Rosenbergs as a crucial symbolic moment (*Blood* 242-247). In an

[118] See "Cuba" and "Nothing of Egypt" in *Bread Out of Stone*, several poems in *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*, "Return" in *No Language is Neutral*, and "October" in *A Map to the Door of No Return*. See also Brand's interview with Frank Birdalsingh in *Frontiers of Caribbean Literature in English*.

interview, she lists "For Ethel Rosenberg" as one of the "landmarks" of her poetic development, explaining that it "was a very important poem for me to write. It was like touching the tip of an iceberg. I'm still struggling with a lot of that stuff" ("Interview" 268). This impression comes through in the poem itself: "She sank however into my soul A weight of sadness / I hardly can register how deep" (*A Wild* 27).

Even though the temporalities of these two poems span three decades (Ethel Rosenberg was executed in 1953 and the Grenada crisis took place in 1983) they are presented as basically addressing the same Cold War thematics, although, importantly and unsurprisingly, from different locations. Although the film's structure and the poets' conversations set up clear – and legitimate – parallels between these two poems, the poems themselves resist being in neat correlation because of the drastically different positions of their narrators. The "I" of "Diary – The Grenada Crisis" is a participant in revolution and a direct witness of violence; the "I" of "For Ethel Rosenberg" is comparatively removed from the politics and violence considered in the poem. For as much as Rich establishes a link between her persona's personal situation and the Rosenberg case, she is nonetheless removed from their case, accessing it only through newspaper headlines, as opposed to Brand's narrator who is in the very midst of the action. These different levels of proximity, participation and engagement make "Diary – The Grenada Crisis" feel more raw and "For Ethel Rosenberg" feel more clever. "Raw" is not meant to suggest unrefined, just as "clever" does not insinuate contrived. My interest is not to judge their differing levels of engagement but rather to note that the poems burst the seams of the structure imposed upon them by the film which presents them, to a certain degree, as matching counterparts. This

observation is akin to my thoughts on the way that race is evoked through the line "A dark woman, head bent, listening for something" (*An Atlas* 3). These are moments when the poetry suggests something beyond the cohesion of the documentary and beyond the courtesy of their conversation. Although Brand and Rich are consciously pursuing a conversation that addresses various differences, the content and organization of their film can tend toward accord and unity, and then the poems push back by inciting the audience to question any totalizing or glossing, and to hang on to the productivity of thinking through differences.

Brand's poetic description of the American invasion of Grenada recalls, for the audience of *Listening for Something…*, the disembodied body parts of the first section of Rich's "An Atlas of the Difficult World," quoted minutes earlier. In "Diary – The Grenada Crisis" the intensity of witnessing such events is conveyed through body parts: "sweat and arms are lost," mouths are open, "eyes full of sleep lie awake," chest, shoulders, neck, breath, and a suggestion of mourning: "something is missing, / some part of the body" (*Chronicles* 38-39). Indeed, the American invasion is figured as a corporeal violation: "the flight of an American bomber / leaves the mark of a rapist" (*Chronicles* 39). There is a strong sense of a collective presence bearing witness to the invasion when the "our" enters the poem to great effect in line eleven and the "I" is present as well, offering details of being physically affected by the conflict ("it is 5 a.m. and I / have slept with my glasses on / in case we must run.") (*Chronicles* 38, 39). This poem comes from the 1984 collection *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* and offers a relatively early example of the way that "the intensely personal is deeply informed by the politics that surround," which Sanders

suggests is true of Brand's entire corpus (xi). In Rich's "For Ethel Rosenberg," "the intensely personal" is the narrator's impending marriage and her family's disapproval and "the politics that surround" are the Rosenberg controversy and American anti-communism. The intermingling of the personal and the political is evident in Rich's use of "home:" "Escaping from home I found / home everywhere: / the Jewish question, Communism / marriage itself / a question of loyalty" (*A Wild* 26). On the one hand, the narrator resists identification with Ethel, holds her "at arm's length" like the media who portray her as the exceptional "extremest victim" (*A Wild* 28, 30).[119] Yet on the other hand, the narrator recognizes Ethel as "that wife and mother / like so many" "being a bad daughter a bad mother" killed as a scapegoat for daring "*to distinguish herself*" (*A Wild* 28). The poem is based on an exploration of what it means to read a political, mediatized event in light of one's own personal drama and it succeeds insofar as it illuminates the larger issues behind each without highjacking Ethel's tragedy. The poem remains staunchly "*For* Ethel Rosenberg" even as it is completely infused with the narrator's private ruminations. As Rich affirms in "The Hermit's Scream," "An event may ignite a poem (which may then be labelled a 'protest' poem) but not because the poet has 'decided' to address that event… A so-called 'political' poem comes – if it comes as poetry at all – from fearful and raging, deep and tangled questions within" (*What* 71-72).

[119] Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, it would be interesting to read Rich's "For Ethel Rosenberg" conjointly with an analysis of the actual media coverage of the Rosenbergs, especially since the poem makes explicit reference to the portrayal of the events in the public sphere. In the context of this dissertation, the media depiction of Ethel Rosenberg could also be linked to the case of Mata Hari (discussed in my third chapter) as both were considered to be female spies. The journalistic treatment of Rosenberg might also be read alongside more recent depictions of female suicide bombers in the Western media in order to note the way that gender, otherness, and ideas of "the extreme" circulate in the reporting.

Despite the significant differences in their narrative perspectives, "Diary – The Grenada Crisis" and "For Ethel Rosenberg" are presented in the film as parallel touchstone moments of disillusionment and radicalisation for Brand and Rich. The poetic conversation continues with an excerpt from the middle of Brand's "No Language is Neutral" (the first eighteen lines of the section beginning "Pilate was that river" *No Language* 27) that picks up on the theme of systemic sexism present in "For Ethel Rosenberg" and resonates with the poets' discussion of global feminism. Both "For Ethel Rosenberg" and "Pilate was that river" represent the oppression of women as a systemic phenomenon enforced even through a woman's family unit and occasioning a sense of entrapment impervious to the woman's desire for escape. The Ethel Rosenberg of Rich's poem is bursting with wishes and wants ("wishing to be *an artist* / wanting out of poverty / … wanting / revolution / … wanting *to distinguish herself*" *A Wild* 27, 28) but she is trapped in a family "like so many / needing its female monster" and then literally trapped "strapped in the chair" (*A Wild* 27). The narrator is haunted by the fact that Ethel was betrayed by her family: firstly, through her dissatisfaction as a wife and mother, and secondly – literally – when her family members testify against her in court. In Brand's "Pilate was that river" excerpt, the gushing river (perhaps the same tumultuous river from the first section of the long poem) symbolizes the mother's entrapment and the impossibility of escape from an environment that defines her according to its depreciation of her raced and sexed body: "river gushed past her feet blocked her flight… and go / where, lady, weeping and go where" (*No Language* 27). Like for Rich's Ethel, oppression is communicated via the mother's most intimate acquaintances: the mother has dared believe that she is "human" but then "got the message,

female / and black and somehow those who gave it to her / were like family, mother and brother, spitting woman / at her" (*No Language* 27). These three lines all end with words that convey her sex and gender (female, woman, her) as if forcing the reader to pause there, at the end of each line, and consider her womanhood as it waits, suspended, to be judged by what follows. Indeed, the word "woman" is repeated five times over these eighteen lines, always in connection with "weeping" (which also appears five times) offering a bleak comment on her ensnared condition and her hopelessness (*No Language* 27).

In between Rich's reading from "For Ethel Rosenberg" and Brand's reading of "Pilate was that river," the film presents the poets discussing the political and economic conditions under which women might be liberated on a worldwide scale. Sceptical of the United Nations supposed commitment to the "empowerment and education of women," Brand argues that international organizations invested in capitalism promote women's liberation only to the extent that it liberates women to join the global workforce as a certain (lower) level. While Rich agrees that "genuine women's liberation" will never occur under capitalism, she points out that socialism does not guarantee greater freedom and equality for women. They share a comradely chuckle over what they see as the foolishness of "the right," personified for them by people who call feminists "feminazis" or those who contend that white men are victimized by affirmative action. They also express concern that the vocabulary of empowerment and liberation employed by feminist activists now issues emptily from the mouths of oppressors paying lip service to feminist causes. Rich and Brand agree that "genuine women's liberation" and "feminist change" could only happen if whole systems and structure of power were to shift. This snippet of conversation is far-

reaching: the poets are referencing vast conceptual terms as they operate on a global scale when they diagnose the relationships between capitalism, socialism, feminism and liberation. Yet placed between these two particular poetic excerpts, it is clear that the very specific, intimate entrapments of Ethel and the mother partake of this same conversation. In fact, the specificity of the poetic images bring their sweeping conversation both down to earth and up to a higher, more nuanced level of understanding and interrogation.

Without the accompanying poems, this segment of conversation seems to partake of a "global sisterhood" type of feminism which assumes women everywhere are oppressed in the same way under an easily-identifiable banner of exploitative global patriarchy (although viewers of the film have seen enough to know that Rich and Brand are unlikely to adhere to such a homogenizing discourse). The specificity of the portrayals of Ethel and the mother ground the discussion in concrete images. While the straps that tie Ethel down are symbols of the systems and structures of power that Brand and Rich denounce, "For Ethel Rosenberg" insists on the particularity of Ethel herself in direct opposition to the Cold War dynamics that utilized her as a symbol of unpatriotic "bad" womanhood. That is, there is a parallel between the way that Ethel as a historical individual functions in the poem and the way that the poem itself functions in relation to the conversation between Rich and Brand. The poem aptly chronicles the symbolic role assigned to Ethel Rosenberg in the mainstream America media ("female monster," "bad daughter," "bad mother" *A Wild* 27-28) and counters that dehumanizing tendency by insisting on her individuality. The poet-narrator of the poem vows to imagine Ethel on her own terms: "if I dare imagine her surviving / I must be fair to what she must have lived through" (*A Wild* 28). In lines not

quoted in the film, the poet-narrator again emphasizes that "if I imagine her at all / I have to imagine first / … how she sees it / not the impersonal forces / not the historical reasons / … I must allow her to be at last / political in her ways not in mine" (29-30). The poet-narrator expresses these intentions, and does imagine a few possible destinies for this fictional Ethel (had she not been killed) but the poem ends by evoking Ethel's irretrievability and her historical inaccessibility: she might have been "no one you could interview / maybe filling a notebook herself / with secrets she has never sold" (30).[120] While Brand and Rich speculate on a generalized relationship between socialism, capitalism, and women's liberation, the case of Ethel Rosenberg demonstrates a particular historicized example of the complex connections between those concepts. As a character in Rich's poem, she grounds their discussion of global feminism by acting as a specific example and she also elevates it by nuancing their suggestions of global patriarchy and global feminism so that the terms feel less empty and more complex.

In a way, Brand's "Pilate was that river" excerpt functions similarly in that it dramatizes the effects of sexism on a particular, personalized woman ("a / woman, my mother" *No Language* 27). The river that blocks the mother's passage parallels the straps that tie down Ethel as symbols of oppressive structures of power that Brand and Rich denounce in conversation, and the family members that vehicle the oppressive values of those systems provide a powerful image of the localized manifestation of larger insidious forces. Yet the poem's more important and original contribution to this segment of the film has to do with the assertion of race. This figure is not only "a / woman, my mother" but also "a too / black woman" and "female / and black" and this strophe of the poem ends by

[120] These lines are also not quoted in the film.

naming "that constant veil over the eyes, the / blood-stained blind of race and sex" (27).[121] At this point in their conversation, Brand and Rich do not overtly mention race, except as it might be inferred from a fleeting reference to women elicited by United Nations' programs. The citation from "No Language is Neutral" therefore serves a crucial purpose. It effectively talks back to the poet's conversation by insisting that histories of racial discourse and slavery have global implications that must also be considered in discussions of patriarchy and politics such as theirs. Although the mother of Brand's poem is particularized, she also embodies such histories: the "blood and salt in her mouth" suggest the violence of the Middle Passage and the "bend" in her back evokes the labour of slave work (27). The poetic excerpts of this section bracket the conversation on global feminist possibilities; in fact, the poems render credible the poets' intervening discussion by insisting on what might be missing from their confident talk of global realities. In a sense, this is a small example of one of the convictions that informs and has been formed by this dissertation project: that particularities expressed through poetics help us to think more intrepidly and with greater precision of the big feminist questions of our globalized world.

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In the next segment of their discussion, Brand and Rich continue to explore the relationship between the political and the personal. They begin by identifying a similar trajectory in their respective careers as writers: they assert that they both wrote about explicitly "political" subject matter before they began to incorporate "personal" lesbian desire into their poetry. Rich muses that this development worked to their advantage

[121] These final lines are not quoted in the film.

because they were familiar with the biases and oppressions of the world and had no pretences of writing apolitical lesbian love poetry, which would be an impossibility given heterosexism and misogyny. As Rich explains it, "knowing the world" meant realizing that lesbian poetry would also be political and that verbalizing that desire would carry its own agency. The poetic excerpts from this third quarter of *Listening for Something…* attest to the unavoidable incursion of the outside or the political in their poetic depictions of lesbian desire but they also depict the mobilization of lesbian desire as a feminist strategy. As such they demonstrate the powerful uses of the erotic as articulated most memorably by Audre Lorde and in a Canadian context by Daphne Marlatt, among others. In her 1978 essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde denounces a generalized tendency to view "the spiritual (psychic and emotional)" as separate from the political and the erotic (56). She asserts that the erotic can be a source of power and information (53) and can nourish the pursuit of change and social justice (58-59). Marlatt cites these insights in her "Lesbera" ("Getting in touch with our desire as lesbians can be a source of power, as Audrey [sic] Lorde has pointed out" 48) and connects the immediate, transforming, anti-authoritarian energy of the erotic with poetic experimentation, called "the erotics of language" (46-47). When Brand and Rich talk about bringing lesbian sexuality into their poetry, they are not merely describing the addition of a new subject or topic to their poetic content. Instead, as Lorde and Marlatt explain, the erotic is an energy that can inform and inspire work and writing (Lorde 54-55; Marlatt 47).

The poems in conversation here are portions of Rich's "Origins and History of Consciousness" and Brand's "Hard Against the Soul." Both imagine, fleetingly, the

possibility of womanhood as simple, outside an oppressive system, as it might exist in Brand's "another place, not here" (as in the title of her novel, but especially as the phrase is used in the final section of "No Language is Neutral," which is also the final excerpt quoted in *Listening for Something…*). Rich's excerpt is organized around enumerations of what is "simple" and what is "not simple" and even what is "deceptively simple" (*The Dream* 8). Meeting a lover, professing love, touching each other against the backdrop of their individual pasts: these acts are listed as "simple" (*The Dream* 8). The repeated ellipses of this section suggest that these acts are not as simple as she professes because they include elements unrepresentable in words, hence the ellipses. Or (and?) the repeated ellipses may (also?) suggest that there are elements of this encounter that remain verbally unrepresented because they belong to that private moment and to "another place, not here." In section ten of "Hard Against the Soul," Brand's narrator longs for such a place and thinks that she might recognize its possibility in the figure of the old woman (*No Language* 47). The figure of the old woman is recurring in Brand's work (especially in the collections *Primitive Offensive*, *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* and *No Language is Neutral* and in the essay "This Body for Itself" *Bread* 91-110) to the extent that Krishna Sarbadhikary calls the face of the old woman the "all-pervasive image in Brand's writing" (121).[122] Whereas the old woman of her earlier poetry is associated with suffering (Sarbadhikary 121), the particular old woman of "Hard Against the Soul" represents the hope for release and escape. "[A]n old / woman is free," the narrator tells herself and she becomes "a place to go, believe me, / against gales of masculinity" (*No Language* 47). Carol Morrell sees this woman as a

[122] Carol Morrell identifies a few other works in which Brand refers to old black women, such as in her film *Older Wiser Stronger* (21).

revision of the old woman that figured in Brand's early collection *'Fore Day Morning* (23). In "Hard Against the Soul" she is "recalled, her significance reinterpreted" in light of the poem's lesbian erotics. Like the phrase "here is nowhere," the recurrence of the old woman resonates in both the Canadian and Caribbean literary contexts. Sally Chives studies the tradition of elderly female characters in contemporary Canadian literary and film production; Hagar Shipley of *The Stone Angel* springs most readily to mind. Suzette Mayr notes that Hagar Shipley is indeed the quintessential old woman of Canadian literature, "relegated to narrating the story of [her] youth while sitting comfortably in the passive frame around the narrative" ("Vampires" 336). In Caribbean women's literature, older Black women are most often grandmother figures who are nurturing and extraordinary in the place of neglectful mothers (Rody 121). Brand comments on this trope in her essay "This Body For Itself" and explores the good grandmother / bad mother dynamic in her short story "Photograph" (Renk 41-45). But the old woman in "Hard Against the Soul" is a neither an influential grandmother nor a Hagar-like narrator; rather, she functions as a hint of the narrator's emerging women-based erotic.

The perceived freedom of the old woman seems to come from her carefree gestures, the fact that she is "set aside, a certain habit washed from her / eyes" (*No Language* 47). She seems to exist alongside or outside of a regulating regime and this recalls a comment from Brand's prose: "Old age is the only time that women escape the precarious and dangerous load of fecundity" (*Bread* 104).[123] But the "dry charm" of the old woman, like the "simple" moment in Rich's excerpt, is soon surpassed as the narrator "lift[s] her head"

[123] In this same essay, Brand also notes that "the burden of the body is as persistent an image in Caribbean women's literature as it is in Black women's lives and only becomes less so in the aged woman who has already passed through" (102).

from the old woman and toward a "you / laughing in another tense" (*No Language* 47). The "you" is her first female lover and "another tense" is the realm of lesbian love and its own language and voice (Zackodnik 200). For the narrator, "the lesbian" is equivalent to the quality that attracted her to the old woman in the first place: "Old woman, that was the fragment that I caught in / your eye, that was the look I fell in love with, the piece / of you that you kept, the piece of you left, the lesbian, / the inviolable" (*No Language* 50). Moving from the discomfort and unravelling she felt looking at the old woman, the narrator now exalts in having found "you:" "I have become myself," she proclaims (*No Language* 51). She even finds a sense of historical continuity for this tradition: "There are saints of this ancestry / too who laugh themselves like jamettes" (*No Language* 51). In her essay "This Body for Itself," Brand explains that the "*jamettes*" were gangs of "loose" women – some of whom dared to live in lesbian relationship – living in Trinidadian cities in the late nineteenth century. They represent the "earliest rumour" of a lesbian presence in the Caribbean (*Bread* 108-109).[124] The word "jamette" lingers in contemporary language as an insult, for a "jamette" is "a brash, loud, sexually 'loose' woman or whore" (*Bread* 108). Brand's claim that the *jamettes* are her saints and ancestors is therefore countercultural, especially given that she describes the *jamettes* via the highly regulated religious process of sainthood and the typically patriarchal concept of ancestry. To identify the *jamettes* as

[124] The following quote from Alison Donnell's *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature* explains why Brand must listen for "rumours" of a lesbian presence in Caribbean history: "In both the wider cultural discourse on homophobia and the small body of Caribbean-specific writing and criticism to date, the exclusion of lesbians and transsexuals has created a no (wo)man's land. Atluri, who spent a year researching at the Centre for Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, Barbados, reported in her paper: 'The absence of material dealing specifically with lesbianism in the Caribeean context…the silence is indicative of one of the largest gaps in information I have found'" (214). Brand finds this silence captivating: "What made me interested in these women was the insistence in the culture that they did not or don't exist and that they did not craft our sexuality and therefore our history" (*Bread* 109).

saints and ancestors is also to identify herself as "a jamette poet," as defined by Marlene Nourbese Philip: "a jamette poet – possessing the space between the legs – the inner space – uncompromisingly – as the outer space" (86).[125] Philip's more lengthy treatment of the *jamettes* in "Dis Place – The Space Between" focuses on the *jamette* women's fierce ownership of urban space and also of "dis place," their vaginas and their sexual vulnerability (77, 82). Inspired by research by historian David Trotman, Brand focuses more on the possible lesbian identities of the *jamette* women (*Bread* 108; *No Language* 51), whereas Philip emphasizes the *jamettes* defiance of male authority and their control of urban and corporeal space/place. For both authors, the *jamette* women are raucous and confident, self-possessed and admirable, and they call attention to their bodies and sexualities. [126]

If these two poems from Brand and Rich were collapsed into one narrative timeline, it would begin with the old woman (the poet-narrator addresses her saying that "the look I fell in love with, the piece / of you that you kept" is "the lesbian") and then move to the simplicity and joy of meeting the female lover before recognizing that this "inviolable" and "simple" place of intimacy is not, in fact, uninfringeable. In that middle moment, there is profound recognition and safety conveyed through a sense of being *seen* and *found* when "a

[125] Brand and Philip both cite the same source for their information on *jamettes*: Bridget (Brand spells it Bridgette) Brereton traces the word from the French *diamètre*, meaning underworld, and describes the *jamette* women as musicians, pimps and gang-members who often worked as domestics and were regarded as transgressive (Brand *Bread* 108; Philip 111 n.8).

[126] In a line not quoted in the film, Brand's poem goes on to portray the *jamettes* "in the / pleasure of their legs and caress their sex in mirrors" (*No Language* 51). Méira Cook suggests that Brand is playing with the stereotypical representation of lesbian erotics as female narcissism. She argues that Brand ultimately contrasts that representation with "the glorious spectacle of equal and equanimous pleasures given and received" (103). I would add that Brand's portrayal of the *jamettes* self-pleasure is not condemning but leads into the narrator's own description (a few lines below) of finding lesbianism as seeing her own body and touching herself: "so easily I saw my own body, that / is, my eyes followed me to myself, touched myself / as a place" (*No Language* 51).

woman looks/ at a woman and says, here, I have found you" (Brand *No Language* 51) and says it is "simple to take your eyes / into mine, saying: these are eyes I have known / from the first" (Rich *The Dream* 8). But there is violence lurking. In the context of a discussion on lesbian poetry, Rich states that, "It should go without saying, but probably doesn't, that no lesbian or gay bedroom – in whatever neighbourhood or tent pitched off the Appalachian trail – is a safe harbour from bigotry (and for some, not only bigotry, but lethal violence)" (*What* 150). Rich notes that lesbian poets persist in writing of that which is simple and inviolable "wishfully evoking a privacy we know is always under siege," but that ultimately "the sexual women in these poems are activists whose bedroom is never far removed from what happens in the streets" (*What* 150). In her "Origins and History of Consciousness," "the streets" do intrude on the simplicity of the bedroom: hearing the scream of someone being attacked outside causes the lovers to consider their own internal scream and to contemplate what it means to survive as a woman anywhere against the threat of aggression. The reminder of violence individualises them and forces them apart after their feeling of union. The narrator states that the scream causes "each of us to listen to her own inward scream" so that "each of us" and "her own" emphasize the individual in contrast to the mutuality described a few lines previously, when "each" was employed to portray the lovers taking "each other's lives in our hands" (*The Dream* 8). In less than ten lines, the poem moves from the intimate bedroom to a consideration of what "any woman" must know "who stands to survive this city, / this century, this life" (*The Dream* 8). This section also ends with ellipses which recalls the ellipses Rich uses earlier in the poem and

suggests that the unrepresentable lurks not only at the core of sexual pleasure, but also in the threat of violence.

Rich's depiction of bedrooms and violence (along with the similar quotes from her prose, cited above) run the risk of presenting a simplistic inside-versus-outside binary: the safe bedroom haven versus the mean outdoors. Her excerpt seems more trusting of the "simple" space of the bedroom than Brand's narrator is of the possibility of escape represented by the old woman. So although I have imagined these poems merged onto a timeline, and drawn a parallel between what Rich depicts in the "simple" bedroom and what Brand describes in the old woman, these poetic moments are actually also very distinct. Inevitably and productively, the poems resist the order that I want to impose on them just as they sometimes resist the way that they are incorporated into the structure of the documentary. Brand's narrator is focused on her *perceptions* of the old woman (as evidenced through the repetitions of "I saw," "I watched," I had a mind," etc.) while Rich's tone is declarative and more self-assured, ensuring the establishment of the "simple" in order to contrast it with the "not simple." Her imagery is invested in an inside/outside binary that troubles the way that I have framed this section in terms of the poets' mutual challenge to such dichotomies of inside/outside and personal/political. There are other tensions between these excerpts too. Rich's urban setting is any city and her anonymous female figure is "any woman" who "stands to survive this city, / this century, this life" (*The Dream* 8) while Brand's nameless woman is a old woman on a beach at a particular moment in time: she is "this woman… sitting…on the rind of a country / beach as she turned toward her century" (*No Language* 47). These differences, which is not to say

disparities, do not invalidate my reading of the resonances between the poems, but they do caution against collapsing the two poets' works into one. In a sense, this is a small-scale example of the debates on collaboration that I outline at the beginning of this chapter. Such debates revolve around the questions of what happens to differences in the pursuit of collaboration, just as I am exploring what happens to discrepancies when they trouble my readings – and parallel to that is the question of what happens to unique features of these poems when they are displaced into a film that has been carefully organized and structured to present them in a certain conversational and collaborative light.

In her essay on the poetry of Minnie Bruce Pratt, Rich writes that "the energy of Pratt's erotic poetry derives not only from a female sensuality only now beginning to find its way into poetry, but from the inseparability of sensuality from politics" (*What* 150). Echoes of Audre Lorde are certainly audible in this interpretation, especially in the connection drawn between the erotic, energy and politics. Rich's comment on Pratt rings true for the poetry of Brand and Rich as well, as they claim language for their lesbian erotics, knowing that such a strategy is subversive and vulnerable to hegemonic violence. To portray the violence preying on the intimate bedroom is a denunciatory move, but to portray the lesbian bedroom in the first place is subversive in its own right. Brand articulates this in her essay "This Body for Itself." She argues that in Caribbean women's writing, women are rarely portrayed as sexual for themselves but are instead figured as heroic mothers or vulnerable girls, their bodies raced, sexed, judged, and therefore burdensome (*Bread* 92, 95, 101, 102, 104). Brand calls for a writing of the body "for itself," by which she means depictions of women desiring and experiencing pleasure for

their own delight. For her, "the most radical strategy of the female body for itself is the lesbian body confessing all the desire and fascination for itself" (108). So when Brand writes about the *jamettes* caressing themselves, it is not only a jab at the stereotype of lesbian sexuality as narcissistic (Cook 103) but it is also an affirmation of the body for itself, which means not just that the body is the object of its own desire, but also that the body is desiring on its own behalf, for its own benefit. Such are the "politics of the body" (Brand *Bread* 93) that infuse Brand and Rich's poetic excerpts and discussions at this point in the documentary, even with their differences. As Rich says of Pratt's poems, "Their power is fused in a conjunction of achingly erotic images and the facts of the world beyond" (*What* 148). As feminists have long affirmed, the supposedly private and personal realms – in this case of sexuality – are intensely and inherently political, and are mobilized to subversive poetic ends simply by being rendered, and by being rendered alongside the threat of violence. This section of the film highlights these strategies in the poetics of Rich and Brand, demonstrating the complex interplay of the personal and the political as they grapple with the national and international politics of their eras, as well as with lesbian sexuality.

Writers and Readers

With the next poetic excerpt, Rich turns from "Origins and History of Consciousness" back to "An Atlas of the Difficult World" and reads a section that continues the above-mentioned theme of violence against women but also announces the

leitmotif of the final quarter of the film: the dynamics of creating poetry. In the film's last four poems and in the intervening discussions, Brand and Rich explore what it means to work in the medium of language with an awareness that language is always embedded in, or born from, specific contexts. Their stories of becoming writers bracket this section of the film. It begins with Rich remembering the creation of her *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, the 1963 collection that signalled the emergence of her unique poetic voice (Langdell 41, Spiegelman 372). It ends with Brand describing the origins of her own call to writing: "I just always had a real love for the sound of things. That's the simplest way I could tell it." In between these two stories, the poets reflect on, and read poetry about, what it means to work with words and to arrange them in such a way that they convey realities and imagine possibilities. In the final section of this chapter, I examine what they profess to be doing as writers, which leads into a discussion of what their readers are doing in response – or more specifically, what I profess to be doing in this reading of their collaborative poetic conversation. I argue that the poets' sense of what it means to write poetry, their sense of what it means to read poetry, and my own aims in reading this piece of art all lead back to the question of the anti-essentialist "we" and its creative potential.

The violence that haunts the lesbian bedroom, discussed in the previous section, is of course only one manifestation of violence against women. Rich depicts a tragic instance of heterosexual domestic violence in the middle strophe of the first section of "An Atlas of the Difficult World." Throughout the excerpt, the narrating "I" records her resistance to relating the tragedy, even as she does so (*An Atlas* 4). The progression from "I don't want to hear" to "I don't want to think" to "I don't want to know" suggests the narrator's

deepening engagement with the story (Waddell 74). She moves from not wanting to hear ("how he beat her") to not wanting to think about what it must have been like ("how her guesses betrayed her") to not wanting to know this horror ("wreckage, dreck and waste") (*An Atlas* 4). The fact that the poem exists, and that she moves from hearing to knowing despite herself, testifies to the poet's role as witness. When the poem finally arrives at the conjunction "but," the sentiment of "I don't want to know, but I have to" is expressed as: "I don't want to know / wreckage, dreck and waste, but these are the materials" (*An Atlas* 4). These are the "materials" of the poem, and possibly also the materials of the lost writing of the victim depicted in the poem, whose partner-turned-aggressor "tore up her writing." The repetition of the phrase "wreckage, dreck and waste" (twice in three lines) is notable in the midst of the plain and often even monosyllabic language of this excerpt (*An Atlas* 4). The less common word "dreck" means trash or rubbish. All three words therefore suggest material that has been ruined and rendered worthless as per the aggressor's devaluation of the woman's body and life. There is a marked contrast between "wreckage, dreck and waste" and the moon, treefrogs, seasons, light and music that are also "the materials" of poetry. The use of the word "wreckage" reminds Rich's readers of her 1972 poem "Diving into the Wreck," arguably among the most important feminist poems of its century (Langdell 97). "Diving into the Wreck" has most often been read as a call to the pursuit of difficult knowledge through which history's suppressed women might be acknowledged (Gilbert 149; Langdell 116-120; Werner 174). Another locus of criticism of "Diving into the Wreck" is its famous line "I am she: I am he" which has been celebrated as a radical portrayal of androgyny (Langdell 118; Werner 174), a move that Rich appears to have

repudiated in her poem "Natural Resources" (Werner 154, 172). How might the wreck of "Diving into the Wreck" relate to the "wreckage, dreck and waste" of "An Atlas of the Difficult World"? Both "wreck" and "wreckage" connote the remains of that which has been broken, destroyed or disabled, whether it be the vague sense of women's epic history in "Diving" or the personal tragedy of a single woman in "At Atlas." Using the same root word to describe both identifies the macro-level wreck of women's history with the micro-level wreckage of an individual's life: both represent the devaluing – the "wreck-ing" – impact of misogyny.

The poet-narrator says that she does not "want to know" of these instances of "wreckage, dreck and waste, but these are the materials" (*An Atlas* 4). In addition to referring to the "materials" of her poetry, the use of the word "materials" also references the materiality of the crime in question since what is described (and resisted) is the destruction of the material body (the beating, kerosene in her face, the truck mowing her down). The "I" of this poem acknowledges a wide scope of witnessed "materials," incorporating not only violent tragedy but also "the slow lift of the moon's belly / over wreckage, dreck, and waste" and the "light and music" that co-exist with "our fissured, cracked terrain" (*An Atlas* 4). The poetic persona who resists "knowing" and testifying to the violence that befell this particular woman would presumably prefer to focus on the light and music; ultimately, this poem exists because she cannot (or chooses not to) ignore the "wreckage, dreck and waste" of misogynist violence. In the context of the conversation with Brand, one wonders if this reluctance or hesitation is a luxury afforded to those who witness violence rather than being victimized by it themselves. Is this another instance of

Rich-as-observer (as with "For Ethel Rosenberg") versus Brand-as-participant (as with "Diary – The Grenada Crisis")? This is not to suggest that Rich has never been a victim of violence or that Brand is obligated to testify to the violence that she diagnoses. But in terms of the poetic excerpts chosen, Rich's poet-narrator spends time depicting her reluctance to witness in a way that would feel very uncharacteristic had it been Brand, whose poet-narrator, when she does use a first-person voice, either speaks with urgent authority ("Take what I tell you" *No Language* 23; "What I say in any language is told in faultless / knowledge of skin" *No Language* 34) or describes the great effort of her engagement with her materials ("I have tried" repeated four times *No Language* 34).

The dense, suggestive, and violent descriptions of Brand's next excerpt pick up on the themes of the poet's role as witness and the relationship between horror and beautiful landscape.[127] She also explores the link between the poet's medium – language – and the historical conditions that form it. "*No Language is Neutral* was like a journey," says Brand in an interview, "like a memory of when language became possible, changed, through that experience of colonization" ("Interview" 15). This particular excerpt speaks to Brand's project of "show[ing] how the relations of slavery, of brutality, and also of silence, of

[127] Brand's most recent exploration of the poet's role as witness is tangible throughout her long poem *Inventory*, in which the poet-narrator's task is to catalogue atrocities. I wonder if the influence of Rich can be detected in works such as *Inventory*. List-making has been identified as one of Rich's primary poetic tactics: Willard Spiegelman calls it her "technique of obsession" (379). There are moments in Rich and in later Brand when the poet-narrators are compelled to act as witnesses to various historical and contemporary atrocities and they therefore list them. I am thinking here of Rich's listing of historically-significant locations on the American map (see sections two and five of "An Atlas of the Difficult World") and of Brand's lists throughout *Inventory*. Of course the geographical scopes of these two examples are different: not unsurprisingly, Rich focuses on the US and Brand's outlook is international. I also detect similarities between the final sections of "An Atlas of the Difficult World" and *Inventory* because they both address their readers, and their reader's desires. Consider also Rich's evocation of one of her readers: "you are reading this poem by fluorescent light / while you wait for the newscast from the *intifada*" ("An Atlas 25) alongside "she" in *Inventory*'s section III, who keeps watch "at the window / of the television" – "there's another life, she listens, each hour, each night, / behind the flat screen and the news anchor" (28, 29).

distance, of loss, begin to shape the language that I speak" ("Interview" 16). The preoccupation with language is immediately revealed through the vocabulary of the poem which refers to many aspects of speech by using words such as: syllables, sound, lips, consonants, aspirate, words, prose, silence, morphology, grammar and idiom (*No Language* 23). (Indeed, the relatively complex language of this excerpt stands in marked contrast to the monosyllables of Rich's previous excerpt.) In the opening lines of Brand's passage, the intense cruelty of slavery and colonization force "new sound" from the bloodied, choking mouths of brutalized slaves. The experience is so all-encompassing that even the landscape, specifically the fierce sea wind (but also the unbeautiful ocean and the malicious horizon), is aggressive and shapes the possibilities of verbalization and articulation (*No Language* 23). As Wiens notes, in "No Language is Neutral" "landscape is personified… as a heaving, howling register of the particular violence of this history" (95). In her performance of the poem in *Listening for Something…*, Brand effects a long pause after the initial description of "the sea wind heaving any remnant of / consonant curses into choking aspirate." Her suspension of the poem at this point underscores the choking silence enforced on the enslaved and also prepares the way for the declarative phrases that follow and that constitute the centre of this portion of the poem: "No / language is neutral seared in the spine's unravelling. / Here is history too" (*No Language* 23).[128]

Like her earlier "here is nowhere," the "here is history too" once again questions the concept of Caribbean "non-history" and "nowhere-ness" proposed in the works of Glissant

[128] These declarative, shorter sentences placed in the middle of the strophe function similarly to the "Here was beauty / and here was nowhere" of the first strophe (*No Language* 22). In the published text of "No Language is Neutral," these two strophes are on facing pages, which makes this similarity of format even more noticeable.

and Walcott. One citation from Glissant that circulates through Caribbean literary criticism states that Caribbean historical consciousness is the result of "shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces. This dislocation of the continuum, and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterize what I call a nonhistory" (Johnson 114; Rody 109) Erica Johnson explains, with reference to Glissant, that "The silence or erasure of history forces the question of how to approach the history of those long denied a voice. Silence resonates at the heart of each scenario, yet the resonances are deeply perceptible" (114). Brand certainly does address this imposing, resonant silence in this passage from "No Language is Neutral" but she also investigates the sound and language born beyond this silence. In the second half of the excerpt Brand melds Trinidadian phrasing with Received Standard English to describe the way that colonial violence shaped sound and imposed silence, but also to suggest that language had to be born from this experience as well, as evidenced in her own poetry of historical witness.[129] "Silence done curse god and beauty here, / people does hear things in this heliconia peace / a morphology of rolling chain and copper gong /now shape this twang, falsettos of whip and air / rudiment this grammar" (*No Language* 23). The sense of historical atrocities steeped into landscape recall, for the audience of *Listening for Something…*, the second and fifth sections of Rich's "An Atlas of the Difficult World" (discussed above) in which she attempts to infuse her country's map with its history's violence. Their poetic strategies are very different: Rich's references specific cities on maps and calendars (*An Atlas* 12) while Brand focuses on

[129] Brand's use of "standard English and Caribbean nation language" is the main focus on Zackodnick's essay on *No Language is Neutral* and Maria Caridad Casas brings a social semiotic approach to Brand's use of languages in her article. Wiens discusses the blend of Received Standard and Trinidaian as "code-switching" in his article (92) and Sanders praises the "effortless bilingualism" of Brand's "poetic maturity" in her introduction to her selected poetry (xi).

evocative description of nature and vegetation along with the vestigial physical objects of slavery (*No Language* 23).

Despite the differences between these two excerpts, both place the poets as witnesses of violence and suggest that the poems themselves are formed by the violence witnessed. Neither language nor landscape are neutral as they reveal the violence that inhabits them. In the final moments of the film and in each of their last excerpts, the poets continue to reflect on what it means to work with words as they consider their intentions, their processes and their tasks as writers. In an excerpt from the sixth section (entitled "Edgelit") of Rich's "Inscriptions," the poet-narrator describes a moment of frustration when she looks through her notes in an attempt to "dredge" (excavate) "for anything usable" when what she finds feels "unsteady, slick, unworthy" (*Dark Fields* 70-71). She writes, "If I dredge up anything it's suffused / by what it works in, 'like the dyer's hand'" (*Dark Fields* 71). In an endnote to the collection *Dark Fields of the Republic*, Rich attributes the quote to Shakespeare, although Shakespeare wrote of nature "subdued / To what it works in, like the dyer's hand." Rich misremembered "subdued" as "suffused," but decided to retain "suffused" regardless, explaining that "to feel *suffused* by the materials that one has perforce to work in is not necessarily to be *subdued*" (79). Indeed, while "subdued to" suggests being defeated, repressed or lessened, "suffused by" connotes something being spread through or poured under ("Suffuse"). The poet-narrator and her message are not controlled (subdued) by the absolute meanings of words, but rather her work is inseparable from (suffused by) the slipperiness of her language.[130]

[130] It is interesting to consider which verb – subdued or suffused – (if either) would best describe the relationship between landscape and violence in the Brand excerpt discussed above!

"I know something about language: /," the poem continues, "it can eat or be eaten by experience" (*Dark Fields* 71). This line resonates with many of Rich's essays in which she reflects on the way that language is co-opted by different systems or ideologies. She is particularly troubled by the "devaluation" of language in a capitalist, free market regime and argues that poetry is consequently of primordial importance because of its willingness to "take on the medium of language with all its difficulties"[131] (*Arts* 118, 149, 158). She concurs with the poet-narrator of Brand's next excerpt: "Each sentence realised or / dreamed jumps like a pulse with history and takes a / side" (*No Language* 34). For Rich, persevering with slippery language means defying the "flattening" of language that she sees as a symptom of capitalist consumerism. "I go on," affirms her narrator, in a short line that stands out on the page due to its alignment along the right margin (*Dark Fields* 71). Later she refers to her "going on" as "this life of continuing," which, given its frustrations and its opposition to exploitation and mainstream capitalist culture, is perhaps reserved only for "the sane mad / and the bravest monsters" (*Dark Fields* 71). If so, Brand joins her in those distinguished and daring ranks, as she searches for language that is faithful to her own landscapes and history, but that dares to imagine something beyond. In the final section of "No Language is Neutral," which is also the final poem quoted in the film, the poet-narrator is introspective and retrospective, employing the present perfect tense to describe her intentions for this piece, with "I have tried" being the most common of her subject/verb clauses (*No Language* 34). Brand too knows that language can be "eaten by experience"

[131] Rich continues: "Difficulties of relationship and strangeness, of truth-telling and torsion and how the netted bridge is to be suspended over the gorge. The longer I live, the more history I live through, the more poetries I read and hear aloud, the more I recognize the sheer difficulty and multiplicity of our art, the absolute necessity for it in this time, and the ethical and artistic responsibilities it demands" (*Arts* 118).

(Rich). On the wind-whipped road of her previous excerpt, cruelty enforced a silence prolonged by surveillance: "the sea wind heaving any remnants of / consonant curses into choking aspirate" and then "When / these barracks held slaves between their stone / halters, talking was left for night and hush was idiom" (*No Language* 23).

As described above, the landscape echoes the violence: as the slaves are dragged along the beach road, blood bubbling at their mouths, "This road / could match that" (*No Language* 23). In the final excerpt, the narrator returns to "this road" where she has tried to both listen to "the hard gossip of race that inhabits this road" as well as "sit peacefully / in this foliage of bones and rain" (*No Language* 34). Although these two sections of "No Language is Neutral" are separated by more than ten pages in the published text, they are nearly sequential in the film, which emphasizes the link between the two instances of "this road." Only Rich's excerpt from "Edgelit" is sandwiched between them. Insofar as the "Edgelit" excerpt depicts the frustrations of persisting in poetic work (language is slippery and corrupt, and yet "I go on"), it resonates well with Brand's "I have tried." In addition, Rich's statement in "Edgelit" that "poetry means refusing / the choice to kill or die" resurfaces in Brand's depiction of sitting in the landscape of cruelty, trying to be present to it and to hear its new language without succumbing to its despair. Although Rich's statement seems almost too pithy in comparison to Brand's description of "this road," there is something of the same feeling of tension in these two instances. According to Rich, poetry is looking for the productive space in-between, or somehow beyond, the kill/die binary, just as Brand is trying to hold on to a necessary calm "to write this thing calmly / even as its lines burn to a close" (*No Language* 34). Yet the differences between these two

sentiments must be acknowledged as perhaps another instance of Rich-as-observer versus Brand-as-participant. Although Rich uses the heavy language of "to kill or die," her focus is own her own poetic "choice," recalling the poet-narrator's choice to testify of the murdered woman in "An Atlas of the Difficult World." Of course, Brand has also chosen to write and to testify but there is a much stronger sense of her being swept up ("its lines burn to a close") and exerting an incredible effort to witness effectively ("I have tried"). In addition to these differences, these final moments of the film place these women as poets intent on listening to their surroundings. Brand's "I have listened to the hard / gossip of race that inhabits this road" brings us back to Rich's "dark woman, head bent, listening for something," thereby adding another dimension to the title of the film, which can now be read in terms of the listening of Rich's first quoted excerpt, and the listening of Brand's final quoted excerpt. The fact that Brand's poet-narrator listens to "the hard gossip of race" reminds us of the racial resonances of Rich's "dark" woman, explored above. The documentary's poetry, therefore, ends by simultaneously evoking the poet's claim to similar positioning (through the echoes of "listening") and their racial difference (through the implications of "dark").

Interspersed with these last poetic passages, Brand and Rich discuss literature's imperative to continue to explore the dynamics of oppression and violence, even as they imagine beyond that to "a sea not / bleeding, a girl's glance full as a verse, a woman / growing old and never crying to a radio hissing of a / black boy's murder" (Brand *No Language* 34). In conversation with Brand, Rich also affirms the joys of poetic creation, although even then she stays true to her sense of social responsibility, explaining that taking

pleasure in creativity also means wanting the same opportunity for all those who might desire it. These final poems and discussions attest to the poets' shared commitment to the slipperiness of language as a methodology of witness which is practiced, inevitably, from their own locations. I would add that it is in investigating the operations of their poetic language that their shared commitments and differing standpoints become visible, more nuanced and in sharper relief. To identify their methodology as a "politics of engagement" (in lieu of a "politics of transcendence") is slightly ironic, or perhaps especially fitting, given that the term comes from a piece by Chandra Talpade Mohanty that is heavily indebted to Adrienne Rich herself ("Feminist" 81, 83). The term applies to what Brand and Rich describe in this last quarter of the film wherein they recognize that language is grounded in and forms the locations that they also inhabit as well as their "materials." There is a progression in the poetic conversation between the poet-narrators of these final excerpts: "I don't want to know," says Rich's narrator. "I have tried," says Brand's. And then: "I go on… I know something about language" (Rich) and "I have come to know something." "Take what I tell you" (Brand). As the film draws to a close (finishing with Brand's simple, almost anti-climactic "I just always had a real love for the sound of things."), the topic is the poets' sense of what their work attempts, acutely cognizant of the complexities of language and location.

As for their readers' involvement in this process, Brands specifies in the film that she is writing *to* (and she corrects Rich when she says "writing *for*") a Black audience with a shared history of oppression. Yet she says that she is "pleased" if anyone else decides to join her readership as well. They are welcome to "overhear" her: "whoever wants to come

in can come in." In Rich's essay "Someone is writing a poem," she presents her understanding of a poem's readership: "Most often someone writing a poem believes in, depends on, a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an 'I' can become a 'we' without extinguishing others, that a partly common language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, images" (*What* 86). This citation is particularly meaningful in the context of this chapter because it suggests that the relationship between a poet, a poem and its readers is ideally a space of anti-essentialist collaboration, where "an 'I' can become a 'we' without extinguishing others." Insofar as a fellow collaborator is always a writer's first reader (York 130),[132] Brand and Rich are demonstrating this type of collaboration throughout the film. (Indeed, even outside of the film, they have both spoken appreciatively of reading each other's texts) (Birdalsingh 135, Rich *What* 249). As their reader, I am of course the third party implicated in the dynamic that Rich imagines, and these reflections are my particular "overhearing," to use Brand's term. As I explained at the outset of this chapter, I am interested in this film as an instance of cross-border, cross-difference collaboration and I read it as radically conversational, and therefore anti-essentialist. My impression is that the way in which Rich and Brand collaborate, and the subjects they choose to highlight, speak to issues of transnational and anti-essentialist feminism and to what was referred to as the "problem" of difference in contemporary feminism in the late twentieth-century. For instance, we might conclude from the documentary that for feminists to collaborate effectively and respectfully across various differences, there must be a careful attention to the politics of location, to national and

[132] Stone and Thompson find this observation unhelpful in its equation of collaboration with reading (22) but it is useful here, given Rich's own understanding of readership quoted above.

geographical positioning, to the complex interplay between the personal and the political, to the slipperiness of communication via language, and to the strength of solidarity based on common causes. As my analysis has demonstrated, these are the primary themes of the poetic conversations of *Listening for Something*…. The film shows that a shared exploration and articulation of these themes is not only a grounds on which to collaborate, but is the manifestation of the collaboration itself. This is not to say that Brand and Rich present a perfect model for collaborating across difference; in fact, there are moments in the film when they are so much in agreement that their differences seem almost forgettable. As I affirm above, this is a testament to the solidarity that they cultivate, but it also suggests that the film's organization tends to downplay their differences. It then becomes the work of the poems to assert difference when it is elided and it is through literary analysis that some of the tensions between their standpoints is explored. The way that the film is constructed invites viewers to listen to the poems in conversation with each other and it is the friction and the resonances between the poems that lead into these thoughts on anti-essentialist collaboration.

In the context of this dissertation project, I am of course ultimately interested in this film as an instance of cross-border feminist collaboration that might figure in a genealogy of anti-essentialist feminism in Canadian women's writing. This inevitably raises the question that haunts the film itself, as well as my reading thereof: where is Canada in this conversation? In terms of content, apart from one poetic reference to Albertan prairies and one comment by Brand regarding her immigration, Canada seems to be largely absent from *Listening for Something…*, although I argue above that Canada comes in through the idea

of "here was nowhere" as it relates to discourses of Canadian identity. The question of Canadian content or "Canadianness" is recurring in Brand criticism and it is often accompanied by a sense of discomfort, as Peter Dickinson discusses in his overview of "how publishing and media technologies in this country frequently contribute to the 'unlocatability' of Brand's work as distinctly 'Canadian'" (157, 160-163). Early on in her career, Brand herself clearly proclaimed that she is *not* on the margins of Canadian literature, but rather at the centre of Black literature ("Interview" 14). Is she to be read, then, as "Caribbean woman of African ancestry" (Zackodnik 196), in terms of diaspora and the "transcultural contact zones between Canada and the Caribbean" (Walter 23), or for what she has "brought to Canadian poetry" (Case 199, 200)? Jason Wiens' position on this question provides a good example of this critical discomfort: speaking of "No Language is Neutral," Wiens writes that "while the text could and should be read as 'Caribbean' (its cross-textual signs, theoretical underpinnings, and anticolonialist stance invite such a reading), I have located it to a large extent 'here'" (99-100). This discomfort may have receded of late, as Brand devotes more and more space to Toronto in her writings,[133] and as her work becomes increasingly entrenched in Canadian cultural institutions and literary canons (Wiens 84). However, even in the 2009 introduction to a collection of Brand's poetry (a collection which is part of a series from Wilfred Laurier University Press that is framed in terms of a national poetry, its goal being to "create and sustain the larger readership that contemporary Canadian poetry so richly deserves" Besner v), Sanders alludes to the on-going discomfort by stating that, "Ironically, Brand's focus on location is

[133] I am thinking here of *What We All Long For* and *Thirsty* especially. Of course, my remark about her increasing engagement with Toronto brings up a whole other cultural and literary debate concerning the predominance of Toronto in Canadian literature and publishing!

also considered a distinctly Canadian question: Where is here? In Brand's mouth, however, the question is quite different from that posed by Northrop Frye" (ix).[134] At the end of the introduction, however, she does not hesitate to claim that Brand's work "constitutes a profound intervention into the national poetic imaginary" (xiv). The discomfort about her critical reception and national boundaries is ultimately productive because such a writer can – and should – be read in a variety of contexts. In this sense, her contributions to Canadian literature are decidedly transnational and must be read as such.

One might also argue, tongue in cheek, that by not explicitly discussing Canada in *Listening for Something…*, Brand is also being "ironically" and "distinctly" Canadian, since for Canadians, "nation is precisely 'that which we take for granted,' with the result, however, that Americans, without mentioning the word, are always talking about *America*, while Canadians, unless they specifically mention the word *Canada*, are always talking about some broader-than-national space" (Smart 13). Patricia Smart offers this comment in an article on gender and nation in Canadian and Québécois feminist writing, in which she also makes the following pertinent observation:

> Nationalism in particular has been seen as dangerous because of its link to the state and its perceived tendency to privilege the homogeneous over the heterogeneous – however accurate a perception that may be in Canada, where the tradition of public enterprise has supported (often in spite of controversy) the production of radical feminist and lesbian films from Studio D at the National Film Board. (20)

The anti-nationalism stance that Smart describes is similar to the one that Brand espouses at the outset of *Listening for Something…*, which is indeed a film funded by the National Film

[134] Peter Dickinson also connects Frye's "Where is here?" question with Dionne Brand, although he declares that "Frye's famous query cannot possibly signify to a writer like Brand" (163).

Board Studio D women's division.[135] The review of the film that Noreen Golfman published in the *Canadian Forum* hinges on this same irony. She commends the NFB for being "a large government-funded body" that produces "some of the most subversive, anti-government statements in the land" and affirms that "the nation-state requires a place where non-commercial products can freely challenge the nation itself" (28). She finds it "highly ironic that this institutionally funded film eavesdrops on the conversation of two intelligent women fiercely committed to social democratic and even socialist progress" (27).

The goal here is not to assert this irony in order to legitimize this film as Canadian, nor do I mean to suggest that the film should have more Canadian content given its funding. Rather, I am interested in highlighting the fact that this Canadian cultural product, funded by a national agency, is deeply transnational in its execution (the video jacket promotes it as "shot in the United States, Canada and Tobago") and subject matter. It can therefore be read as a manifestation of transnational feminism, which is why I frame my analysis in terms of anti-essentialist collaboration, the core of transnational feminism. I include these comments on Canadian content and transnationalism here at the close of the chapter in order to consider the place of this film in a dissertation invested, albeit critically, in the field of Canadian literatures. It seems impossible not to do so in the context of a film so concerned with location, politics and the personal. Ultimately, this consideration of the conditions of the film's production serves as a reminder that it is itself a material construct, a point that is worth recognizing given Rich and Brand's investment in materiality and the conditions that shape it. Ending with the exterior conditions for the construction of the film

[135] In fact, *Listening for Something…* was one of the last films that Studio D produced before its demise in 1996 following federal government budget cuts (Dickinson 159; "National").

also acts as a reminder that the film's entire conversation and the accompanying poetry have also been constructed according to specific conditions, artfully and with particular intentions. My contention throughout this chapter has been that that construction helps us to imagine "the dream of a common language," to use Rich's phrase, by which she means a dream of "poetry [as] an art of translation, a connective strand between unlike individuals, times, and cultures" (*Arts* 134).

Chapter Five: Citizen Monsters: Sexualities, Racialization and Suzette Mayr's Venous Hum as Feminist Prairie Writing

"I have a real delight in satire, in putting across really heavy messages by making them funny so that people accidentally swallow the pill."
- Suzette Mayr, interview in Thomas 171

"The challenge to remember the recent past need not be an empty academic exercise but can instead initiate a critical process that encourages us – indeed pressures us – to think back and forth simultaneously, thereby breaking the spell of knowledge constructs that situate the knower outside the conditions of the known."
- Roy Miki, "Global Drift" 155

Suzette Mayr's recent novel, *Venous Hum*, begins by evoking two memorable moments in Canadian political history. In a short passage preceding the prologue, Mayr refers to Justice Minister Pierre Trudeau's 1967 amendments to the Criminal Code of Canada, specifically the decriminalization of homosexuality and increased accessibility to abortion. She couples this instance with Prime Minister Trudeau's 1971 inauguration of national multicultural policy, which was born out of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, and was later concretised in the 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act. With the tongue-in-cheek satirical humour that sets the tone for the rest of her novel, Mayr states that when Trudeau famously announced that the state had no place in the nation's bedrooms, "the beds of many nations promptly spun out of control"

(11). The passage ends by noting the long, flowing haircut that Trudeau sported in the early 1970s, and asserting that, "Canada's hair has been dishevelled ever since" (11). In these two short paragraphs, Mayr manages to introduce and intertwine a number of the concerns of her novel, notably the Canadian nation-state's official stance on the sexual behaviour and varied cultural backgrounds of its citizens, the French/English bilingualism that was a backdrop for multicultural policy, and the sense of "dishevelment" and loss of control feared by those who oppose greater immigration and sexual freedoms. Mayr's presentation of these two moments suggests that these issues – of race, culture, citizenship, and sexuality – must be read in light of one another, and that a consideration of the complex consequences of these two representative decisions will inform the narrative she crafts throughout *Venous Hum*.

In addition to this note about Trudeau, two epigraphs also precede the novel's prologue. One is a letter to Ann Landers about high school reunions as places of potential healing. The other is a citation from Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* ("Florence Nightingale was a cannibal, you know."). These disparate prefatory fragments foreshadow the action of the narrative and allude to its central queries. Can the scarring racism that eclipses official multicultural policy be resolved and forgiven at a high school reunion? How does that lived experience of racism in a government-funded school system relate to the promises of Canada's official multicultural policy? How might categories of race and sexuality intersect on the level of the national imaginary, but also on the level of individual subjectivities living in that nation-state? And what does the character of a cannibalistic nurse (Louve) signify in light of these questions? Why refer to Atwood at all? My interests

in responding to these questions are twofold. First, I read *Venous Hum* in conversation with contemporary feminist theory, specifically as both speak to intersectionality, heteronormativity, and the relationship between bodies and nations. To this end, this chapter is particularly concerned with the novel's explorations of issues of race and sexuality in Canada, as portrayed through Lai Fun's coming-of-age story and in the magic realist monster imagery. This postcolonial feminist reading highlights the radical anti-essentialism of Mayr's text, which questions an essentialist notion of Canadian citizenship as well as essentialist understandings of sexuality and racial identity. *Venous Hum* confronts readers with the fluidity and intersectionality of subjectivities in complex relationship with their nation-state and their fellow citizens, and ultimately, through specific narrative techniques, encourages readers to consider their own implication in the interpellation and other-ing of certain identities.

The other interest guiding my reading of *Venous Hum* is to situate Mayr's work in the Canadian literary context. This means considering *Venous Hum* within the categories of Prairie writing and diasporic literature and noting the ease and unease with which it can be placed there. Contextualizing Mayr's work within Canada also means considering it in light of other Canadian women's writings, which *Venous Hum* invites us to do with its intertextual references to Margaret Atwood, for example. The politics of Mayr's novel (especially as they relate to contemporary feminism and theories of subjectivity and citizenship) help us to rethink the clichés of Prairie writing or Canadian feminism, and to speculate on the differences between Canadian women's writing that came out of second wave feminism and more recent works that resonate with third wave feminism. I will not

argue that Mayr's novel represents a total departure from earlier Canadian writing on the Prairies or by women elsewhere; indeed, that would be contrary to the guiding principles of this dissertation project, which is ultimately interested in connections and genealogies rather than in disruptions. That is, it would be faulty to establish a narrative of progress by which the enlightened feminist politics of *Venous Hum* replace the now essentialist feminism of *The Edible Woman*, or by which *Venous Hum*'s multicultural urban Alberta takes precedence over depictions of Prairie farms run by white Canadians. However, I will venture to suggest that Mayr's take on feminist identity politics help us to notice how things might have changed Hagar Shipley and Mrs. Ross were the most recognizable of fictional prairie women, or since *The Edible Woman* was on the cutting edge of Canadian feminist literature.[136]

Reviews of *Venous Hum* testify that there is indeed something challenging and refreshing at work in this novel. Suzanne Alyssa Andrews, who reviewed the novel for the *Toronto Star* and *This Magazine*, asks, "Is CanLit ready for same-sex marriages in suburban Alberta and supernatural vegetarian vampire cannibals? Suzette Mayr is brave enough to say yes" ("Demons"). Andrews goes on to declare that the novel "explodes obvious stereotypes about Prairie Westerners, multicultural schooling, lesbian relationships and vegetarianism" ("Demons") and she concludes that, "Mayr blends humour with horror and shifts CanLit conventions with satire" ("Fang"). The back cover of *Venous Hum* also touts its originality by stating point blank that the novel is "an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence announcing the end of writing as you know it, and the beginning of something

[136] I am aware that Atwood's 1981 introduction to *The Edible Woman* (which I reference later on in this chapter) challenges the classification of the novel as feminist.

entirely new." Whether or not we agree with this hyperbolic praise, it is clear that this novel is being perceived as an innovative contribution to Canadian literature. Contextualizing its contribution is a prominent concern of this chapter.

If there is a common thread that links my goals for this chapter, it would be the idea of challenging institutions, should they be literary, national, societal and/or political ("I'm writing against tradition in a number of ways," says Mayr.) (qtd. in Grubisic). Reading *Venous Hum* in conversation with contemporary feminism means reading its probings of the institutions of official multiculturalism and heteronormativity. Reading the novel in response to notions of Prairie writing means questioning a facile understanding of that category, which may have become too institutionalized within Canadian literary criticism. Reading it in dialogue with Margaret Atwood also implies a querying of a well-established image of Canadian women writers, insofar as Atwood's prominent position in Canadian literature gives her a kind of institutional positioning. It is not surprising that Mayr's work might encourage readers and critics to question cultural institutions; this corresponds with her own understanding of the role of art. In an interview with H. Nigel Thomas, Mayr explains: "I think that art, and therefore writing, is essential for a culture to be self-aware and hopefully, self-critical, and therefore as beautiful and as useful as it could possibly be" (164). In support of her beautifying and utilitarian project, therefore, readers and critics are invited to identify the Canadian cultural criticism inherent in her writing.

In the context of this dissertation project, a crucial question arises: can an anti-essentialist transnational feminist reading illuminate this particular novel even as it engages with some long-standing issues of Canadian literary criticism (such as regionalism)?

Because *Venous Hum* is so thoroughly invested in its strident critique of Canadian national identity (and other countries are barely mentioned), it is in some ways a challenging candidate for a transnational reading. Then again, it is also a fitting choice, given the strong transnational studies tendency toward national critique (as evidenced in *Scattered Hegemonies*, for instance) and because of its allusions to diasporic citizenship. Kit Dobson's book *Transnational Canadas* (which I discuss in my first chapter) is organized around a progression from "Canadian nationalism," which deals with literature from the 1960s and 1970s, to "Canadian multiculturalism" (1980s) to "Canada and the World" (2000s).[137] Mayr's *Venous Hum*, published in 2004, engages with all three of these categories and time periods. Set in 2005 with flashbacks to the 1980s, *Venous Hum* explores the on-going reverberations of Canada's 1967 decriminalization of homosexuality and its 1971 and 1988 implementations of national multicultural policy, while performing third wave feminist critiques of heteronormativity and the racialization of gendered subjects. As a very recent publication, it challenges the timeline suggested in Dobson's table of contents, where it seems that we critique the national in order to move on and really get down to business with the transnational and global.[138] Here lies the tension inherent in my interest in *Venous Hum*: on the one hand, I am interested in how it disturbs a falsely progressivist narrative wherein we disengage with the nation in order to think about the transnational. On the other hand, I am interested in what might be *new* in *Venous Hum* and what might distinguish it from other (often chronologically earlier) women's writing in

[137] He addresses the fact that he skips over the 1990s in his "Introduction to Part Three" (141).
[138] I really am referring specifically to what is insinuated by the chapter headings and chronological ordering of his table of contents, which implies a progressivist narrative that his nuanced literary approach ultimately defies.

Canada. As I juggle this tension between continuity and radicalisation, I proceed first with a section that contextualises *Venous Hum* in terms of Prairie writing. Analyses of the racial and sexual politics of the novel take up the bulk of the middle part of this chapter. Finally, I turn to its depiction of monsters and cannibals via a postcolonial feminist reading of those tropes, and end with thoughts on *Venous Hum* in the larger context of a genealogy of Canadian women's writing.

Urban Prairie Vampires: *Venous Hum* as Regionalist Writing

Venous Hum takes place in urban Alberta; Suzette Mayr teaches at the University of Calgary; is this literature therefore "Prairie writing"? The temptation to point to specific passages in the novel that reference Western Canada – long Albertan winters (40), chinooks and Prairie sky (186), a boom-and-bust oil economy (197) – in order to safely claim this book as Prairie writing, springs from a well-established tradition in Canadian literary criticism, by which regionalism is equated with markers of place and references to a particular geography make a text regionalist (Davey 2). Despite its specifically Albertan setting, however, *Venous Hum* does not have the profile of a typical Prairie novel; its cast of characters, setting, and narrative strategies can feel worlds apart from *As For Me and My House*, to cite a classic Prairie novel. Yet as I mention throughout this chapter, Mayr's work can be linked with that of other Prairie writers, such as Sheila Watson, Aritha van Herk, Hiromi Goto, or even with the magic realism of Robert Kroetsch. Why then might it feel incongruous to begin this reading of the politics of *Venous Hum* by evoking the Prairies? Davey suggests that critics must move beyond the type of regionalist criticism that

simply notes geographical specificity in a text (not to mention criticism that then attaches a determinism to those signifiers) to think critically about regionalist discourse (2-3). In this section, I explain how the careful situating of Mayr's work in a Prairie context enables critique of the way that regionalism and Prairie writing have been institutionalised in Canadian literary criticism. This also serves as a useful introduction to the dynamics of Mayr's novel as we wonder about the implications of her Prairie setting, and as we note the comfort or discomfort of labelling *Venous Hum* "Prairie writing." Ultimately, the work of this section exemplifies the tension between continuity and newness that I find in Mayr's work as it is both barely and obviously "Prairie writing," depending on how such a category is understood.

In their article entitled "When Is the Prairie?," Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh make an important distinction between the way that critics have often presented Canadian Prairie literature, versus the breadth of creative writing actually coming out of the Canadian Prairies. The creative writers, they say, have worked to bring history, geography and literature together, whereas literary critics have tended to construct a category of "Canadian Prairie writing" dominated by discussion of landscape and geography over culture and history (8).[139] Aritha van Herk alludes to the same distinction in her introduction to *Boundless Alberta: New Fiction* when she notes that the "short fictions gathered here configure Alberta quite differently from its ubiquitously ascribed gophers and grain elevators, prairie and sky, oil wells and Rockies" (viii). The elements that critics have "ubiquitously ascribed" to Prairie writing highlight the rural and agricultural experience of

[139] For an overview of literary criticism dealing with the Canadian Prairies, see Dennis Cooley's "The Critical Reception of Prairie Literature, from Grove to Keahey" as well as Alison Calder's "Reassessing Prairie Realism."

the Prairies. In response to this sentiment, Canadian cultural critic George Melynk asks, "why must the city be at odds with prairie identity? Why must it be considered out of place when it is in place?" (88; see also Sorensen 15). Referring to himself as a "demythologizer of the urban prairie" (115), Melynk questions the perception that "compared to the Metis buffalo hunter or the sunburnt farmer on his tractor, images of the Western city are almost an afterthought that expresses some kind of inauthenticity in relation to the region" (87). The attitude that Melynk describes relates to the mythical norm created by the elevation of certain books to canonical status, thus implying that "real" Prairie literature is that which realistically depicts the rural, agricultural, and often white experience of Prairie life (Calder 54; Vernon 68). However, as Jenny Kerber points out, the vision of the rural Prairie home place is unfamiliar to a growing number of Prairie inhabitants (75). As noted above, it is also misrepresentative of the extent of writing that has been produced from the Prairies – *Venous Hum* being our particular case in point. Contrary to the mythical norm of realistic, rural Prairie writing, *Venous Hum* is decidedly urban (and suburban), frequently departs from realism by incorporating fantastic elements, and portrays characters from a variety of racial backgrounds.

Considerations of Canadian Prairie writing, like regionalist outlooks generally, have taken new directions in recent years, directions that can be summarized via three actions: defending, opening, and positioning. First of all, already in the 1980s, certain critics were *defending* regional literature from the assumption that such works were necessarily provincial and parochial and focused on the past. For instance, in a 1980 article on regionalism and Canadian drama, Diane Bessai argues that regionalism need not be

synonymous with "narrow, limited, parochial, backward, out-dated or isolationist" when regionalism at its best is "rooted, indigenous, shaped by a specific social cultural and physical milieu…reflects the past as well as the present and…absorbs innumerable influences from beyond its borders" (7; see also Adamson 86 and Precosky 89). The sense that regional literature is aesthetically conservative has lingered nonetheless, and is still being challenged (Riegel et al. xiii; Calder 54). As Mayr has stated, "Canadian prairie literature is varied and complicated, but too often it is presented on the Canadian national stage as 'regional' in the worst, most limited, most unflattering sense of the word" ("Vampires" 331). Second, there has been a move to *open* up the category of regional literature so that the works viewed through a regional lens might be more heterogeneous. Feminist critics have been involved in this endeavour as they highlight the contribution of women to regional literatures and challenge the misogynist underpinnings of some regionalist concepts (Riegel et al. Wylie xiii). The work of Prairie writer and critic Aritha van Herk provides an excellent example of this as she has sought to deconstruct the masculinist myth of "the West" and to propose a feminist ideology of regionalism (Verhoeven 62-63; Sellery 24-25).[140] Mayr herself figures in Rob McLennan's list of writers who are "sexing the Prairie" through literature that challenges the supposed maleness of Prairie writing (1-2). Widening the lens of regional literature has also meant pluralizing regional canons in an effort to think through the relationship between regionalism and cultural difference and ethnicity (Riegel et al. xiii). In terms of Prairie

[140] Aritha van Herk has had an important influence on Mayr's writing, as is immediately evident even in the acknowledgements to Mayr's three novels. In terms of this discussion of regionalism and Prairie writing, it is particularly interesting to note that in *Venous Hum* Mayr notes her indebtedness to van Herk's *Mavericks: An Incorrigible History of Alberta*.

writing, this has meant "writing a home for Prairie blackness," to quote the title of a 2004 article by Karina Vernon (who went on to write her doctoral thesis on *The Black Prairies*.) Vernon describes how regional discourses and regional anthologies of the Canadian Prairies have routinely ignored the work of black writers (67-69).[141] Her article goes on to analyse a play by Addena Sumter Freitag and a memoir by Cheryl Foggo, both of which "challenge our inherited notions about the prairies as a homogeneous, unraced microcosm" by "re-placing blackness into the regional imaginary" (81). Vernon's work provides an important precedent for considering Suzette Mayr in relation to Prairie writing because Mayr's work is deeply engaged with questions of racial difference.[142] Jenny Kerber's recent article on the poetry of Winnipeg writer Madeline Coopsammy resonates with Vernon's viewpoint as well because Kerber locates her project alongside that of the many writers and critics working toward "a more flexible conception of prairie writing that includes and accounts for the complex contradictions, hybrid identities, and multiple allegiances of the writers themselves" (87).

The task of opening up regional canons is rooted in the conviction that regional boundaries and clichés are the results of ideologies that serve particular privileged interests. This stance is also foundational for what I identify as the third point of the recent

[141] George Elliott Clarke's take on the link between race and Canadian regionalism is interesting to note: he speculates that African-Canadian literature is often in tune with "standard Canadian regional variations" (332). Although I have pointed out how Mayr's writing is different from the clichés of "Prairie writing," Clarke suggests that her "crisply ironic" mode mirrors tendencies in Prairie writing. I certainly agree that aspects of her work do resonate with some other Prairie writers, as I mention later in this section, but her subject matter does depart from classic typical rural Prairie realism, a mode that continues to hold a privileged place in Can lit (Calder 54).

[142] Race is a crucial subject in all three of Mayr's novels. In *Moon Honey*, the main plot twist occurs when the white protagonist suddenly becomes Black. In *The Widows*, Hannelore comments on Cleopatra Maria's mixed-race identity (17) and struggles to confront her own complicity in Nazi politics and ideology (Wolf 138). Mayr says that while *The Widows* "does not go into overt depth in its investigation of race as a construct… race forms an important sub-text" (Mayr "Vampires" 335). I provide a detailed exploration of the racial politics of *Venous Hum* later on in this chapter.

reconsideration of regionalism: the enablement of new *positionings*. The abovementioned work of van Herk, Kerber and Vernon all spring out of deconstructions of the ideological foundations of Prairie writing as an institutionalised category. That is, van Herk, Kerber and Vernon are all invested in exploring how a particular regionalist construction (that of Prairie writing) might be positioned in terms of larger dynamics of race and/or gender. In turn, regionalism as a concept can also be positioned in relation to the nation-state, for instance, or in relation to globalization. Frank Davey proposes this dual focus – on positioning regionalisms in terms of ideologies, and positioning regionalisms in relation to other political realities – in his essay "Towards the Ends of Regionalism." Davey argues that the discourse of regionalism in Canadian literary criticism must be re-imagined in terms of ideology, power, and the relationships between regionalisms and the nation-state, colonialism, and globalization (Davey 2-17). Davey highlights the complexity of the positioning of regionalisms, which might resist the centralizing discourse of the nation-state while simultaneously effacing internal differentiation, or which can be co-opted by the nation-state even as they struggle against the uniformitization of global culture (4-5, 16-17).

Davey's thoughts on positioning regionalism in relation to the politics of the nation-state are particularly relevant to my analysis of *Venous Hum*, which I read for its interventions vis-à-vis regional *and* national imaginaries. Mayr herself connects her choice of a Prairie setting with the impact she hopes to have on a national readership: "Although she initially wondered whether the rest of Canada would care about the characters she places in what she describes as a Calgary/Edmonton hybrid, she's convinced Alberta makes a stronger political impact than more predictably liberal Ontario or Quebec would have"

("Fang"). Mayr explains that the politics of her novel are highlighted because they contrast to the stereotypes that circulate about Alberta; that is, contrary to Alberta's perceived "lack of cosmopolitanism and sophistication," she wants to show that there exists an "undercurrent of rebellion" (qtd. in "Fang").[143] By setting her novel in urban Alberta, she heightens its impact by defying assumptions that readers might make in response to its geography, and in doing so, she participates in the opening up and pluralizing of Prairie writing as a category. She also represents realities that resonate with the experiences of a growing number of Prairie inhabitants (Kerber 75). Furthermore, she hopes that by surprising her readers in the "rest of Canada," the politics of her novel will be more startling, and ultimately more effective. This hope aligns with a recent trend in the positioning of regionalist criticism whereby regions are seen as potentially productive places for resistance to centralizing discourses (Riegel et al. xii; Davey 16-17). It is from a specific regional location, with all its attendant clichés and expectations, that Mayr offers meaningful critiques of Canada's (supposedly) unifying policies on bilingualism and multiculturalism, as discussed in the next section. It is important to recognize the place from which Mayr offers these critiques. As Pamela Banting points out, the politics of location (meaning the politics of identity as they have been theorized in recent years in terms of situatedness) have often ignored actual geographical location, which is always also part of identity construction (49).[144] Mayr locates her novel in a specific province in relation to the larger nation-state; parallel to that, I locate my reading of her novel in the context of

[143] One review of the novel highlights this dynamic. After describing the novel as a "very queer" story involving "a murderous retirement age ex-nurse, a cannibal's feast" and "the pregnant married suburban lesbian having a half-hearted affair with her best friend's vain pothead of a husband," the reviewer specifies that "all this mayhem, incidentally, takes place in Calgary, a city normally associated with rodeos and the oil sector" (Grubisic).

[144] I discussed the politics of location in greater detail in my fourth chapter.

Canadian literary criticism engaging with the category of "Prairie writing;" and on another level, this reading then participates in a larger discussion on the values of regional literary criticism as it has been recently reconceived.

There is no doubt that Prairie identities as depicted in literature are (and have been) plural and various, and literary criticism is increasingly grappling with this multiplicity, although Alison Calder has recently called on Canadian scholars to increase their critical investment in regional criticism ("What" 113). In the anthology he co-edited with Robert Kroetsch, Jon Paul Fiorentino even proposes the term "post-Prairie" to describe works that reflect the increasingly diverse, urban, cosmopolitan Prairie experience, in contrast to the conventional associations of Prairie with the rural past (11). Jenny Kerber is hesitant about "post-prairie" as an adjective because it seems to consign certain experiences to the past, and to detach "Prairie" from its continuing geographical and economic realities (the countryside and bases of production) (Kerber 88). Still, it is important that critics are suggesting new terms and expressions to signify the internal heterogeneity of "Prairie writing," which includes writers like Madeline Coopsammy (the subject of Kerber's article), Addena Sumber Freitag and Cheryl Foggo (the subjects of Vernon's essay), Suzette Mayr and others. Whereas their writings are considerably different from those of Sinclair Ross or Margaret Laurence, they do resonate with each other, and with a number of other "post-prairie" authors.[145] For instance, Mayr claims strong affiliations with Hiromi Goto, a Japanese-Canadian writer who, like Mayr, "form[s] novel renditions of Canadian

[145] I do not want to overstate my case here, as it would also be productive to study the *similarities* between Prairie writing of an older, rural generation and that of Mayr, Goto, etc. To some extent, I participate in such a project when I draw connections between *Venous Hum* and the work of Margaret Atwood, Sheila Watson and Susan Swan.

identities through [her] use of Canadian social and cultural space" (Beauregard 174). Whether or not we devise a new subcategorical adjective for these writings, the point, of course, is to declare that they are also Prairie literature, and to interrogate the ease or unease with which that statement is made in order to explore the ideological underpinnings of the category itself and to amplify our readings of these writers.

Venous Hum and Racialized Citizenship

So what are the "post-prairie" politics of *Venous Hum*? What kinds of cultural critiques is Mayr presenting in her fiction? In this section, I argue that the novel makes an important contribution to on-going conversations about the management of Canadian multiculturalism and the depiction of diasporic citizenship. The protagonist of *Venous Hum* is Lai Fun, daughter of Louve, who has "dark brown" skin and is from "back home in Ottawa" and Fritz-Peter, also from Ottawa, who has "pink and white skin" and a "very subtle, un-English, un-Scottish, un-Irish accent" (89, 101). Louve and Fritz-Peter assign a particular identity to Lai Fun. Conceived during a "long, luxurious session of tremendous, patriotic lovemaking" on the day that Trudeau announced that the state had no place in the bedrooms of the nation, she is their "glorious Canadian proclamation" and "a child of all of Canada" (93). In their eyes, Trudeau himself is "the prototype of the perfect Canadian" and Lai Fun will be "another perfect Canadian" because she is their "wonderful, bicultural, bilingual baby" (93, 107). Louve and Fritz-Peter invest all of their optimism regarding Canadian nationalism and official policies in Lai Fun; as a character, she therefore

functions as a test case or as a synecdoche for the (bilingual, multicultural) national identity proposed by the Canadian nation-state. By embodying these policies and aspirations in Lai Fun, Mayr is able to explore the fraught relationship between the triumphant rhetoric of mosaic multiculturalism and the lived realities of racialization. Yet her treatment of these themes is not necessarily what readers might expect, especially in terms of Louve and Fritz-Peter's attitudes toward their diasporic and Canadian citizenships.

When Mayr opens her novel with the two seminal moments in Canadian cultural history referenced above (Trudeau's 1967 Omnibus Bill, and his 1971 policy on multiculturalism),[146] she does so in a satiric tone that implies that these governmental changes could never instigate the adjustments in attitude that they proposed, nor live up to the expectations they elicited. Her wording highlights the fact that official multiculturalism issued a message of welcome to non-Europeans who had been immigrating to Canada for years. She proclaims that, "Those who never felt comfortable suddenly were *home*" (11). The declarative tone of this enormous proclamation suggests its absurdity: as if people's sense of belonging could change so suddenly and so drastically with one state policy. Yet Louve and Fritz-Peter are extremely empowered by Trudeau's message of welcome. They are intensely patriotic, claim Canada as home, and hope to produce the perfect Canadian citizen in Lai Fun: "the Canada they want, the daughter they want, is special and bilingual" (89). They speak of loving Canada (197) and exalt in the joys of their country: "Canada, the land of liberation. Like singing out loud in the street, like walking for the first time in the sunlight" (186). Their optimism and sense of empowerment vis-à-vis the Canadian mosaic

[146] This is not the first time that Mayr's fiction has made use of iconic figures from Canadian history. Her evocations of Trudeau throughout *Venous Hum* parallel *The Widow*'s regular quotes from Pierre Berton.

is exaggerated, but it is not to be dismissed. The discourse of official multiculturalism in Canada is marketed powerfully as a national unifier and is certainly celebrated by many of its citizens (Bannerji *Dark* 97; Kernerman 17). For instance, although prominent cultural critic Max Wyman admits that "not everything about multiracial Canada is harmonious" (83), he describes multicultural Canada with a pride and hopefulness that Louve and Fritz-Peter would certainly share: "Pluralism and cooperation are the foundation on which Canada was built and the core of its social strength today. … Canada is … a unified society built on recognition of the fundamental integrity of parallel ethnicities and beliefs" (77). One wonders where the violent colonization of the First Nations peoples figures in this characterization of Canada. Mayr connects Louve and Fritz-Peter's enthusiasm with the experience of her own parents: "I came of age during Trudeau's Canada. My parents were both immigrants and they loved Trudeau, just this urbane, sexy politician and his policy on immigration" (qtd. in Parke). Although *Venous Hum* ultimately performs a strong critique of the triumphal rhetoric of Canadian official multiculturalism, it also recognizes the inspiring potency of that rhetoric, taken to heart by so many.

In his article, "Black History and Culture in Canada," Cecil Foster argues that the idealized version of the Canadian nation-state as "a paradisiacal country …where different ethnic groups from all parts of the world live in harmony, tolerance and goodwill" is plagued by a "dream-deficit – the gap between the ideal and what now obtains" (346-348). Louve and Fritz-Peter certainly experience a gap between the rootedness they claim following Trudeau's official welcome, and the reactions they receive from fellow citizens. The perpetual "but where are you *really* from?" exasperates Louve: "the one thing she can't

bear, no matter how long she lives, how many times she hears it, is people asking her where she's *really* from. As though she could not possibly come from this country and belong to this soil" (176).[147] Louve is confronted with this question because of her skin colour, which marks her as exotic, as immigrant, as other. "Aren't many people look like you," shouts a man trying to take her picture outside of the grocery store, "Just wanted to take a picture to show the wife!" (89). Louve and Fritz-Peter must explain that they are from Ottawa, which is a clever choice of city on Mayr's part because Ottawa (with its staid reputation and its status as national capital) is ironically made to stand in for whatever "exotic" locale the man was expecting (he suggests that she might be from Montreal!), also implying that Louve and Fritz-Peter have issued from Ottawa's (as synecdoche for the Canadian government's) immigration policies and been sent to Alberta as delegates of Canada's new multicultural nationalism. When the narrator states that, "the fact that Fritz-Peter is from Ottawa is not as noticeable" (89), readers understand that being "from Ottawa" means being marked as racially and/or culturally different, exemplifying the irony that Mayr employs to encourage critical thinking on the relationship between state governance and multiculturalism.

In fact, apart for the "from Ottawa" response, readers are not given much information about the cultural, ethnic or national backgrounds of Louve and Fritz-Peter. While Louve's racial identity is explicitly revealed as Black (albeit through the gaze of her neighbours, as I discuss below 90), her status as an immigrant is ambiguous. She and Fritz-Peter are "from Ottawa" (89), and yet they also identify as immigrants *cum* citizens in

[147] The fact that Mayr targets this particular question as the most exasperating seems to be particularly true-to-life: for instance, when Sister Vision press published a collection of "Stories of Identity and Assimilation in Canada," it was titled "*…But where are you really from?"* (Palmer).

Canada (106). The novel does not provide a comprehensive history or background story of their lives pre-Canada, although there is one cryptic reference to "back in the old country" (166). Because of this gap, readers are invited to question their own unsatisfied curiosity about the lack of an immigration narrative, to which they might feel entitled ("but where are you really from?"). This lack of information might also be an implicit comment on the problematic way in which any non-white Canadian might be assumed to be an immigrant. This characterization of Louve and Fritz-Peter as decidedly univested in their former home (wherever it might be) is opposed to the usual conventions of diasporic literature. For instance, in her work on "minority literatures in Canada," Lily Cho explains her understanding of diasporic subjects as those "whose agonized relationship to home engenders a perpetual sense of not quite having left and not quite having arrived" (98, 99). This is certainly not the case for Louve and Fritz-Peter; are they therefore denied their diasporic status? This implicit critique of the expectations of diasporic or immigrant literature is an example of *Venous Hum*'s unrelenting anti-essentialism and another instance of the way in which it troubles clichés and assumptions.

One of Mayr's more explicit interventions is to bring issues of race and racialization to the forefront of her depiction of the lived experiences of Canadian citizenship. Himani Bannerji suggests that an understanding of racialization is one of the main ingredients needed to ensure that Canada's mosaic approach to multiculturalism integrates crucial antiracist politics (*Dark* 8). Cecil Foster expresses something similar when he argues that from the perspective of Canadians who are seen as different because of their skin colour,

"the tolerance that is venerated by the Canadian mainstream takes on a different meaning – not of acceptance or acquiescence, but of the shortcomings and the gaps between the reality and the dream, between the lived experiences and the constructed norms, between the achieved and the promised" (354). Race and the processes of racialization surface explicitly in *Venous Hum* when readers are already ninety pages into the narrative ("Part II The Way of Elementary School"). It is at this point that Louve and Lai Fun are identified as "the only black lady on the street and her half black, half white little daughter" (90). By delaying the description of these characters' racial identities, which have not been mentioned up to this point, Mayr forces her readers to examine the assumptions they have made since the beginning of the novel.[148] Part one of *Venous Hum* introduces Lai Fun as a suburban-dwelling adult woman, married to Jennifer, sister to Angélique, daughter to Louve and Fritz-Peter; no racial background is provided in "Part I Dear Ann Landers." When page ninety mentions the skin colours of Louve and Lai Fun, readers must examine the range of their reactions and (hopefully) articulate why they imagined these characters in a certain way, and what difference it makes (or does not make) to have this additional information. This scene opens up an interrogation into "the inscription of race on the racialized body" (Pearson 78) in which readers are (perhaps uncomfortably) implicated because of the organization of the narrative. This narrative tactic is also employed by Hiromi Goto (Mayr

[148] During a class discussion on *Venous Hum*, certain undergraduate students expressed frustration that this detail was withheld until page ninety. One student described feeling like he had to go back and start the novel over, so that he could imagine Lai Fun as a Black person (he called her "Black" although the narrative specifically describes her as "half black"). Another student protested that it was "too much" to have a character who is half black, a lesbian, a vegetarian, *and* a descendent of monsters. Both of these comments assume a certain norm from which Lai Fun deviates – too widely, in their opinion.Mayr anticipated this reader response: "Up until recently I have been extremely hesitant to include main characters who are of colour *and* homosexual or bisexual because of the fear that my work might be read as too full of "issues," as too didactic" (Mayr "Vampires" 337).

thanks her in the acknowledgments to *Venous Hum*), whose "Not Your Ethnic Body" explores the constructed nature of race as it plays out in the relationship between the writer and the reader (Harris).[149]

In addition to implicating readers by coming so late in the narrative, the action of the scene built around Louve and Lai Fun's skin colour is constructed so as to further emphasize the theme of the *perception* of racial difference. Louve accompanies a five-year-old Lai Fun to the bus stop across the street from their house while the neighbours observe from behind their windows. Louve knows that "Maybelline and Robert, the white, retired, Scottish couple in 1102, are watching her. She and Fritz-Peter and Lai Fun are always being watched. Like they are exotic animals or friendly monsters" (90). The neighbours' gaze is dehumanizing: the simile compares their status to that of animals or monsters. The neighbours' gaze is also the perspective from which Louve and Lai Fun become raced, and this is therefore the narrative moment at which their skin colours are mentioned. The neighbours are what Rey Chow calls the "zoo gazers:" "the ethnic is being hailed not only from within the ghetto but also predominantly from the outside, by the cultural critics (the zoo gazers) who are altruistically intent on conferring on her and her culture a radical meaning, one that is different from the norm of their own society" (108). Writing out of her Canadian experience as a professor and woman of colour, Himani Bannerji describes her perception of a similar gaze: "They stop on the outer edges of my skin, they pick out my colour, height, clothes, and I am aware of this look, 'the gaze' that both comes from and produces fixity" (*Thinking* 101). In the case of Louve and Lai Fun's neighbours, or the

[149] In the article referenced here, Harris also writes about the reader's potential reaction to the absence of gender cues in Goto's *The Kappa Child*. These are examples of how Mayr and Goto challenge their readers to examine how they are reading / consuming characters' bodies.

camera-wielding man at the grocery store, their gazes "come from and produce fixity" because they look at dark brown skin and think that they can interpret it (i.e. as exotic and un-Canadian) thereby fixing individuals within their own assumptions and producing the flawed fixity of racial profiling.

The connection between gazing and fixity recalls Frantz Fanon's responses to the interpellation, "Look, a Negro!" as well as Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation, which Chow argues can be used to explain "an ethnic person's practice of internalizing a cultural stereotype of herself" (108).[150] In *Black Skin, White Masks,* he writes that "the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye" and later: "I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*" (109, 116). The effect of what Fanon terms "color prejudice" is that of being seen only in terms of skin colour, and therefore of not being seen at all. Eleanor Ty refers to a parallel dynamic as the "politics of the visible," by which certain raced subjects can experience moments of *hypervisibility* as members of "visible minorities" although they may, at other moments, experience a sense of *invisibility* (when unrepresented in dominant culture or history, for example) (12; Pearson 77). When Wendy Gay Pearson brings the politics of the visible to bear on Hiromi Goto's poem "The Body Politic," she describes how some bodies "while still excluded from representation within the body politic, are almost hypervisible – both a discursive and a 'real' visibility that follows from their inscription into the public sphere as a matter of public and national interest" (77).

[150] Chow goes on to discuss revisions and critiques (particularly Slavoj Žižek's) of Althusser's understanding of the internalization of interpellation, which, is has been argued, "deprives the interpellated person of her agency to respond with variation or to reject the call altogether" (109). In the context of *Venous Hum*, Mayr plays with the distance and overlap between the extent to which the neighbours interpellate Louve as non-human and her literal monstrosity, which I discuss at length later in this chapter.

Because Canadian multicultural policy is very much invested in the category of "visible minorities," brown-skinned bodies can, at strategic moments, be rendered hypervisible. Bannerji critiques the concept of "visible minorities" by pointing out that visibility means difference and that "everything that can be used is used as fodder for visibility, pinning cultural and political symbols to bodies and reading them in particular ways" (*Dark* 112). What Louve and Lai Fun experience as they cross their street one morning speaks to the politics of the visible and to the racializing power of a dominant gaze. Not only are readers forced to question their own gazes and the way that they have inscribed race onto these fictional bodies, but they are called to recognize the very process by which race, difference, and different kinds of visibility are imposed on certain citizens.

After Louve and Lai Fun are observed walking down their street, the narrative follows Lai Fun to her elementary school, where she first encounters Mrs. Blake. If Lai Fun is the "child of all of Canada" (93) embodying bilingualism and multiculturalism, Mrs. Blake is her opposite, as Mayr emphasises in the formal organization of this narrative section. Indeed, the contrast is highlighted when the "child of all of Canada" passage is followed by a section break, and then: "What is that? Give me that, Lou-Anne! commands Mrs Blake, but Lai Fun, being the much younger second daughter of Louve and Fritz-Peter and a child of Trudeau's mania and sexual liberation, slips the candy into her mouth" (93). The authoritative, intolerant Mrs. Blake is immediately in conflict with Lai Fun, whom she insists on calling "Lou-Anne" (another act of interpellation) despite Lai Fun's protests. "My name is Lai Fun, Lai Fun coughs out. Not Lou-Anne! What is your Canadian name

then? asks Mrs. Blake" (93).[151] In the character of Mrs. Blake, Mayr parodies white Canadians of European descent who are ignorant, racist, and fearful toward people of other cultural, racial, ethnic or national backgrounds. She embodies the late-twentieth century "reactionary voices of those who lamented the loss of a former 'Canada' that, in their eyes, was more stable, more homogenous, more connected to representations of colonial legacies" (Miki 149). The absurdity of Mrs Blake's hateful attitudes are obvious because they are so clichéd and so blatantly portrayed, and yet she represents the very real racism that affects everyday lives in multicultural Canada, and that produces the "dream deficit" denounced by Foster. The study "Who Belongs? Exploring Race and Racialization in Canada" states that, "In the Canadian context, the discourse of multiculturalism that presents Canada as culturally neutral and as embracing *all* cultures is contradicted by the consistent presentation and construction of 'Canadians' as white" (Taylor, James and Saul 157). In *Venous Hum*, Mrs. Blake exhibits this racist tendency. After deciding that Lai Fun's name is too "ethnic" and unusual to pronounce, her gaze on Lai Fun "produces fixity" (Bannerji *Thinking* 101) when she concludes that this "little black girl with a Chinese name" must be dirty, badly brought up, and unintelligent (93, 98).

In the classroom, Mrs. Blake's racism is evident in her endorsements of the most clichéd stereotypes. She teaches the children that, "Indians wear feathers as part of their costumes," and calls upon Lloyd, a Native student, to demonstrate, which he refuses to do because he does not know what she is talking about (98). Later on, she privately imagines

[151] This episode highlights the obvious importance of naming in *Venous Hum*. In one scene, a frustrated Lai Fun tells her parents that she wants to change her name to something less "weird;" her frustrated and bewildered parents explain that they just wanted to name her after their favourite kind of noodles (128-130). Other names reverberate differently. A "louve," for instance," is a female wolf, which could relate to Louve's vampiric tendencies. The manly, god-like resonances of Thor are both ironic and appropriate, given his arrogant opinion of his own power and desirableness.

his body as "prairie, Native, wild" (103). Mrs. Blake is both condescending and intrigued by this Native boy, believing that he is both exotic ("prairie, Native, wild") and knowable and on display ("Indians" wear feathers; Lloyd can therefore demonstrate feather-wearing). This is another example of the workings of the "politics of the visible," as mentioned above. Mrs. Blake assumes that Lloyd should display a (stereotypical) element of his particular cultural background for the benefit of the group, by rendering himself hypervisible and representative of his people group. This scene evokes two major criticisms of the discourse of official multiculturalism: its assumption that cultural groups (particularly "visible minorities") should be on public display and perform their ethnicity for others (Chow 112; Kernerman 98), and the corresponding assumption that an individual can be taken as representative of his/her race, ethnicity, or culture.[152] David Palumbo-Liu explains that assumptions such as these are posited upon "a clear sense that it is the interpreter [in this case, Mrs. Blake] who has taken upon him or herself the power to assign an identity to another" (768). In this school setting, where children are being educated into the social, cultural and political norms of their society (Taylor, James, and Saul 164), Mrs. Blake models the dynamics of this power relationship, wherein she assigns identity to others, thereby entering into "a particular relationship with the object of assumption. That relationship… takes place against and within the backdrop of a history of narratives of similar encounters, real and imagined; the racial encounter – or, more broadly, the

[152] In Canadian literary circles, such issues of representation and responsibility have been debated at length as writers of colour have considered the extent to which they are read as representative of their larger community. For example, in "Issues for the Writer of Colour," Sally Ito states that, "Whether the writer is aware of it or not, s/he represents his/her community. In many ways, a writer coming from a minority group is responsible for the way the group will be perceived in the mainstream" (172). Makeda Silvera, in "How Far Have We Come?," protests this mode of reading when she denounces the pressure placed on individual Black women writers to "speak as authorities on every facet of Black women's lives" (194).

encounter with difference" (Palumbo-Liu 768). Mrs. Blake demonstrates to the class the power dynamics of an encounter with a particular difference, so that in the subsequent paragraph, they have assimilated the message, and tease Lloyd on the playground by saying, "How, kemosabe!" (98). When Lloyd responds violently, Mrs. Blake sends him to the principal's office, her response implicitly suggesting to the teasing students that their role in the altercation is dominant, powerful, and granted impunity.

In addition to her assumptions about Lloyd, Mrs. Blake is also discriminatory toward her French-speaking colleagues. She is nostalgic for the "old days with the old principal before French started being taught in schools and shoved down honest, Canadian throats" (as if French-speakers are not honest Canadians) (95). In her opinion, Canada has become "a country gagging on languages crammed down its throat" and she faults her Francophone workmates either for their "bad English" or for their "English so precise it must be foreign" (102-3). Mrs. Blake's fear and aversion toward French in the school and in the nation-state generally is extreme: she sees students as being "seduced by the French menace. The French peril. Hatred runs up the front of Mrs Blake's dress like a feral cat" (95). Her anti-French stance relates to the politics of the novel in a few different ways. It certainly heightens the opposition between herself and Lai Fun. In stark contrast to Mrs Blake, who abhors Trudeau and the "foreignness" of the school's French immersion program, Lai Fun is infatuated with all things French: "French, a language of elegance. English the language of stasis, the language of Mrs. Blake" (97, 102). The contrast between the two characters allows Mayr to explore the tensions inherent in the fact that they represent two opposing conceptions of the same nation-state. The qualities that make Lai

Fun the "child of all of Canada," namely her bilingualism and her biculturalism, are perceived by Mrs. Blake as threats to her Canadian identity. The irony is that citizens of the same nation-state can have such divergent opinions on the cultural identity of their country, especially when they differ over the points of official policy – bilingualism and multiculturalism – which are meant to be unifying and centralizing discourses for Canada. Even more ironic is the fact that Lai Fun, along with many of her classmates, never actually ends up learning French (35, 202). Like the dream deficit of multiculturalism, Canada's supposed bilingualism also suffers from a gap between official discourse and lived reality.[153]

Mrs. Blake's aversion to French also affords Mayr an occasion to allude to the complicated, historical links between Canadian bilingualism and Canadian multiculturalism, suggesting that any response to official multiculturalism must recognize it, at least in part, as a strategic and self-interested move on the part of the state. Even in the novel's pre-prologue section on Trudeau's policy changes, Mayr alludes to the link between bilingualism and multiculturalism: she describes Trudeau's multicultural policy as proclaiming "Bonjour, You are invited, Hello, vous êtes invités" to immigrants (11). The state's adoption of an official policy on multiculturalism in 1971 is commonly interpreted as a move made in the context of growing tension between French and English Canada. That is, critics argue that official multiculturalism was an attempt to mute the claims of Québec nationalists – not to mention those of First Nations peoples – by rendering their

[153] These gaps (between official discourses of bilingualism and multiculturalism versus their lived realities) are echoed throughout the novel in the portrayal of Trudeau. While he is depicted primarily as a sexy, admirable, romanticized figure, there are recurring hints that some of his political decisions caused significant grief for large portions of the Canadian population (61, 176, 195). Again, the point is to notice the ambiguity of what the state (re)presents.

claims and their differences on a level playing field with a host of other cultures (Bannerji *Dark* 9, 91, Kernerman 59, Miki 148). In this view, official multiculturalism becomes the state's "legitimating device of transcendence" (Bannerji *Dark* 95) by which the federal government can profess to have transcended the conflicts of the two colonizing solitudes. Mrs. Blake's discriminatory attitudes towards Francophones, visible minorities, and Native peoples allude to these historical particularities and encourage readers to think critically about the context for multicultural policy, and the legacy of that historical moment.

When Mrs. Blake thinks of French immersion and her francophone colleagues as "the French peril" (95), the phrase ironically recalls the "Black peril," a term used to describe the fear, rampant throughout the British empire, that black or brown (colonized) men might attack white (colonizer) women (Stoler 58).[154] This is a small example of the way that Mayr makes sure that issues of race and racialization are present throughout the narrative, just as they are in the lived experiences of racialized Canada, and just as anti-racism politics should be part of national multicultural policy (Bannerji *Dark* 8). Mrs. Blake, who is so invested in the assumptions she makes based on skin colour, tells Lai Fun: "Black is the name of your skin and the black crayon is the one you should use to colour in the skin on your self-portrait, Lou-Anne" (99). As with her treatment of Lloyd, she turns this into a teachable moment for the other children: "See, class? Isn't black a better colour for Lou-Anne?" (99). The scene, like much of Mayr's parody, is laughable in its absurdity; readers shake their heads at Mrs. Blake's ignorance. Yet this simple anecdote speaks to the pervasiveness of racial "logic." For instance, it recalls the "logic" by which a peach-

[154] The power and gender dynamics of the "Black peril" are discussed in chapter three of this dissertation, where I relate it to the figure of the *memsahib* so important to Daphne Marlatt's "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts."

coloured crayon was officially labelled "flesh" until Crayola LLC changed it to "peach" in 1962 ("Color"). This scene also invites readers to question the "logic" by which Lai Fun is "black" when she is actually a mixed-race child. Lai Fun can certainly claim a black identity if she so desires, and indeed, individuals of mixed-race heritage in Canada have traditionally been perceived as black and have self-identified as black (Taylor, James, and Saul 160). However, critics suggest that "multicultural discourse in Canada, framed in terms of ethnic and cultural identification, creates difficulties for racially mixed individuals who wish to claim a *multiracial* identity, especially when such identities signal a crossing of racial and ethnic boundaries where 'multiple heritage' does not fit within the broader cultural categories expected or set out for them" (Taylor, James, and Saul 173). Mayr is particularly invested in this very issue; she explains, "As a biracial writer writing about biracial experiences, I am extremely interested in the categories that define the biracial subject and the dominant culture's dependence on the ideology of racial classification" ("Vampires" 331). In Lai Fun's case, not only does Mrs. Blake's racist, literal black-and-white thinking seek to determine her racial identification, but the frameworks of official multiculturalism, with its investment in "visible minorities," performs a similar determination. Cecil Foster points out that the "attempted homogenization of people of African ancestry into a single ethnicity with a manufactured essence – an essence that is imposed and at times accepted by those positioned as Black in Canada" is at odds with the social justice of a multicultural, liberal democracy, which, in theory, promises citizens that they can "fully actualize themselves within the nation-state while self-identifying themselves by a specific ethnicity if they wish" (348). This inevitably connects back to "the

politics of the visible," and to the concept of gazes that "come from and produce fixity," as discussed above. Lai Fun is only visible to Mrs. Blake (as black) through her static, racist perspective and she tells Lai Fun that there is only one way for her to represent herself (as black).

Mrs. Blake's obsession with hierarchies of skin colour haunts Lai Fun's scholastic career. In Grade Twelve, Mrs. Blake (now a high school teacher) supervises the production of a play, *The Mikado*. A popular choice for amateur and school productions, Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado, or the Town of Titipu* was a late-nineteenth century opera set in Japan but satirizing British politics and institutions ("The Mikado"). *The Mikado* has long been criticized for its stereotypical and shallow depiction of Japan, and contemporary productions often modify offensive lines – or even alter the script entirely in order to directly address its racial politics (La O). To include a production of *The Mikado* within *Venous Hum* is appropriate on a number of levels. Both *The Mikado* and *Venous Hum* are satires of the politics and institutions of a Western nation-state. It is ironic that Mrs. Blake directs a play originally meant to satirize England, when her own racist and colonial attitudes would revere British origin as the one legitimate "Canadian" background. This subtlety is lost on Mrs. Blake, of course, and her involvement in putting on *The Mikado* highlights the racial dynamics of a production of a play already bearing its own prejudices. Lai Fun senses the twisted racial issues of the play, and, having internalized the message that her racial background limits possibilities for her, volunteers for wardrobe, because "it would be fucking unbelievable for a brown girl to dress up like she's Japanese" (115). Lloyd lands a leading role on-stage, and "no one has the guts to tell Lloyd that it's a little

bit weird that a Native kid is pretending to be Japanese" (119). During rehearsals, Mrs. Blake can be heard shouting, "Lloyd, more powder! You need to be paler!" (120). As with the crayon scene that marked the beginning of Lai Fun's school-going days, the production of *The Mikado*, which comes at the end of her high school career, continues to emphasize racism's investment in skin colour and the "politics of the visible" as they affect visible minorities. The impact of these representative moments is also described in terms of the corporeal. That is, Lai Fun learns to doubt the value of her embodied experience: "Mrs Blake tries to make Lai Fun hate the silvery taste of her own saliva, the slick movement of her own eyeballs" (99). The beginning if her marginal involvement in *The Mikado* prompts a long session in the bathroom, where Lai Fun fastidiously removes body hair and douses herself with scented products, "afraid she'll be smelled by Mrs Blake" (116). Lai Fun has learned to mistrust her body because of the negativity it has attracted. Lai Fun's high school angst finally culminates in an emotional discussion with her parents, during which she tells them: "I'm tired of being a weird-looking, weird-named immigrant kid" (130), and "I want to be like other people" (128).

In *The Dark Side of the Nation*, Himani Bannerji reminds readers that multiculturalism is not a static "thing;" rather, "it is a mode of workings in the state, an expression of an interaction of social relations in dynamic tension with each other, losing and gaining its political form with fluidity. It is thus a site for struggle, as is 'Canada,' for contestation, for a kind of tug-of-war of social forces" (120). The racialized experience of Canadian multiculturalism as portrayed in *Venous Hum* is also a story of tensions, fluidity, and struggle, evoking the optimism of the multicultural dream and the "dream deficit" that

haunts it. As much as Mrs. Blake might wish for a uniformly white Anglophone Canada, the multicultural character of the Canadian population is not a concept to be accepted or rejected; it is a fact that the state attempts to manage through a certain discourse, and that is experienced in countless everyday relationships, fraught with assumptions, buoyed up by genuine connections. Through the character of Mrs. Blake, Mayr invites us to think critically about how race and the politics of the visible manifest themselves in the interracial and intercultural exchanges of daily life. When Lai Fun graduates from high school at the end of the extended flashback of *Venous Hum*'s Part II, Mrs. Blake seems to have disappeared from her life. But the lasting impact of having had her as a teacher is clear even at the end of Grade One: "In her booming, urban prairie way, Mrs Blake prepares the children for the crappy world out there. Lai Fun learns fast and well that her wiry, tripled pigtails and stupidity around the multiplication blocks that look like small cubes of cheddar cheese don't belong in this class. Mrs Blake prepares her for the world" (104). The repetition that Mrs. Blake "prepares her for the world" highlights the fact that Mrs Blake functions as an initiation into a world of discrimination, representing and foreshadowing a host of other similar encounters to come. Yet when Mrs. Blake does reappear in the novel (as she will later on in this chapter) it is under very different, even extraordinary circumstances that call into question the determinism of her effect on Lai Fun.

Heteronormativity and Intersectionality

Lai Fun's school years are formative not only because she learns about her body as raced, but also because she learns about her body as sexual, confronting not only the

assumptions occasioned by her skin colour, but also perceptions (including her own) of her lesbian sexuality. Mrs. Blake makes it abundantly clear that whiteness is a norm from which Lai Fun deviates; Lai Fun also perceives the norm of heterosexuality, and is troubled by her burgeoning homosexuality. Indeed, when she exclaims to her parents that she wants to be like "other people," rather than being a "weird-looking, weird-named immigrant kid" (128, 130), readers (unlike her parents) know that she is also feeling the pressures of heteronormativity. Described as "the terrible need to belong" that causes Lai Fun to rejoice when she is (chastely) kissed by a (gay) boy (84), the pressures of heteronormativity weigh on Lai Fun throughout high school. In this section I provide a reading of the ways in which heteronormativity affects Lai Fun's coming-of-age. I then consider the parallel between the nation-state's management of multiculturalism and the state's forays into (or out of) the bedrooms of the nations. Ultimately I suggest that Mayr portrays Lai Fun's experiences of these different facets of her identity as overlapping and enmeshed, and this section therefore closes by linking *Venous Hum*'s identity politics with contemporary feminist theories of intersectionality. Intersectionality has been praised as a rectifying response to the essentialism and exclusions of mainstream feminism but it has also garnered criticism for not delivering on such a promise. The intersectional subjectivities portrayed in *Venous Hum* permit an exploration of the promise and pitfalls of intersectionality as a concept.

Heteronormativity can be defined as "the normative status of heterosexuality [as] institutionalised and legitimated through institutions such as the family and through discourse, rendering other sexualities abnormal and deviant" (Hockey, Meah and Robinson

23).[155] For feminist scholars, Adrienne Rich set the groundwork for this terminology in a 1980 essay when she described the "the bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible" (632; Richardson 65). In Lai Fun's experience, heteronormativity permeated her high school and was entirely infectious, so that she herself "fell for boys all the time… She looked at them and wanted them or tried to want them in her mouth, on top of her" (49). As an adult looking back on her high school experience, Lai Fun asserts that she "wasn't gay then" (49). The narrative repeats this succinct declaration ("she wasn't gay then"), and then states the opposite: "although she was always gay – gay from the second she was born – she just got swept up in the other girls' hysteria" (49). Mayr's diction is enormously effective and evocative in this passage. She does not simply state that the adolescent Lai Fun had yet to come to terms with her own sexuality, or something of that sentiment. Rather, she asserts that she "wasn't gay then" in order to convey that the power of heteronormativity and Lai Fun's "terrible need to belong" was such that she tried to stifle that which had been true of her since birth. The narrative explains, "Yes, she was utterly gay then, but it was too difficult in school. And how could she realize when everyone *told* her she was supposed to want boys' cocks in her mouth and between her legs? She dutifully loved boys" (49). In addition to being a wink at the debates over sexuality as innate or learned, this passage highlights the complexity of claiming an identity when the roar of the norm is so loud as to drown out one's sense of oneself. Even Lai Fun's adoring parents

[155] A similar phenomenon is also referred to – perhaps confusingly – as "heterosexism." Suzanne Pharr defines heterosexism as that which "creates the climate for homophobia with its assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual and its display of power and privilege as the norm. Heterosexism is the systemic display of homophobia in the institutions of society" (16).

unwittingly suggest a compulsory heterosexuality to her: "Louve would ask her, Did you let that boy touch you? and Lai Fun would know that she should have asked that boy to touch her" (49). Indeed, even though Louve supports Lai Fun's same-sex marriage years later (16), she still wonders "how all this homosexuality came to be" (61), speculating that it might be because of their move from Ottawa to the Prairies (89). This is another tongue-in-cheek allusion to the debates over the nature/nurture character of sexualities, rendered all the more effective because of the ridiculous suggestion that the Prairie climate (specifically the lack of spring and autumn) may have caused Lai Fun's lesbianism. Mayr's implicit comment is on the absurdity of trying to determine the "causes" of homosexuality and a play on the idea that one sexuality is more "natural" than another ("natural changes of the seasons" being necessary for heterosexuality) (89).

To return (again) to the two seminal Trudeau-related moments with which Mayr opens her novel is to realise that sexuality, like multiculturalism, is also subject to management by the nation-state. Diane Richardson describes the way that notions of citizenship have shifted to include that which is private, intimate, and associated with sexual identity, so that writings on citizenship now reference the idea of "sexual citizenship" (63-64). *Venous Hum*'s take on sexual citizenship within Canada is nuanced. On the one hand, Trudeau's famous comment about the state having no place in the nation's bedrooms implies the government's retreat from that which is intimate and private. Terry Goldie provides a pertinent perspective on Trudeau's statement:

> This is a particularly interesting phrase in the light of the tradition of sodomy laws. Renaissance European governments believed that the state was dependent on certain conformity in these bedrooms. Trudeau, however, was attempting to move Canada *as a nation* away from state control of such

> individual freedoms as are found in sexuality. Sexual morality was no longer to be a microcosm of governmentality (18).

Louve and Fritz-Peter certainly experience Trudeau's statement as liberating and even erotic: Lai Fun was conceived the night that "Pierre Elliott Trudeau – with his crooked, sexy smile – announced that the state had no business in the bedrooms of the nation. Louve said, I'm too old for another baby! but Pierre Elliott and Fritz-Peter seduced her" (93). The irony is that although, as Goldie describes, Trudeau was moving the state away from control of sexual freedoms, he was, on another level, strategically repositioning the state's stance on sexuality via his own sexy persona and in hopes that that stance might bolster citizen support and allegiance. Mayr alludes to this irony when Trudeau's statement about exiting bedrooms affords his entry into Louve and Fritz-Peter's.

In the Canada of *Venous Hum*, the state has not only exited the nation's bedrooms, but it has also sanctioned the marriage of same-sex couples. Indeed, the novel opens with the wedding of Lai Fun and Jennifer (19-26).[156] In recent years, the right of same-sex couples to be legally married has become a defining feature of Canadian identity, perhaps especially because this issue is a point of distinction between Canada and the United States. For example, the 2006 film *Souvenir of Canada* (based on Douglas Coupland's books of the same name) shows a stream of images meant to evoke Canadian identity, including a series of clips depicting demonstrations for the right to same-sex marriage, and same-sex wedding ceremonies. Although Jennifer is relatively indifferent to the wedding as a legitimating ceremony, Lai Fun is more invested in its legal significance: "Being official

[156] Although certain provinces and religious communities had been conducting same-sex marriages years beforehand, it was only in 2005 that the Canadian House of Commons passed Bill C-38, which granted same-sex couples the legal right to marry ("Same-sex"). The fictional world of *Venous Hum* (published in 2004) anticipates this move. Although their wedding date is not provided, Lai Fun and Jennifer have been married for at least two years when the high school reunion takes place in October 2005.

and recognized is important, those matching rings on their marriage fingers mean they belong to one another" (37). Lai Fun's reaction recalls the appreciation and liberation felt by Louve and Fritz-Peter upon the announcement of Canada's official policy of multiculturalism: "they have nothing to be ashamed of, because Canada welcomes everyone" (106). Both Lai Fun and her parents feel personally validated by the official recognition of the state, in relation to their immigrant background or to their sexuality. And yet for as much as Mayr points to the importance of official edicts as discourses that have real effect, she also continues to portray the gap between celebratory official proclamations and lived reality. In terms of multiculturalism, my previous chapter section argued that Mayr portrays its dream deficit. In terms of same-sex marriage, the novel suggests that as much as it is a crucial right, the freedom to marry the person of one choice does not do away with heteronormativity and gender stereotypes. Lai Fun is particularly struck by this when she attends her high school reunion and reflects on the unwritten rules that guide the interactions between the former classmates: "girls have to be married and fertile and boys have to have fertile wives and their own businesses. Reunion rules. But these myths, as Lai Fun would tell you, are exactly myths and nothing more. Maybe" (205).

The novel thus presents the nation-state's official policies regarding multiculturalism and sexuality as parallel: they are biopolitical discourses that manage population diversity in specific ways, and define the nation-state to its citizens and vis-à-vis other countries (i.e. the perception that Canada is a place where people of different cultures, races and sexualities live in harmony, as facilitated by the state). When Mayr suggests these parallels (as she also does by pairing the two moments involving Trudeau's stances on

sexual privacy and multiculturalism), she is inviting readers to think more generally about the identity categories implicated in these discourses (those of race and sexuality) as overlapping and interconnected. In her descriptions of Lai Fun's own grappling with these aspects of her identity, Mayr suggests their enmeshed nature. "The terrible need to belong" (84) that Lai Fun experiences in relation to sexuality parallels her desire to "be like other people" in terms of race and culture (128). Lai Fun's relationship with her classmate Daisy is a good example of the interconnectedness of such identity categories, as well as any ensuing discrimination. During a brief, magical moment in high school, Daisy kisses Lai Fun, "Daisy's face soft and bony and perfect like the rose in Trudeau's lapel" (126). Unfortunately, Mrs. Blake is always watching (105) and she concocts a way to ruin their relationship (125, 127). It is only later on at the high school reunion that the narrative mentions that, "Daisy was the only other black girl at the school" (151). As with the postponed mentioning of Lai Fun's race, readers must examine what assumptions were made when only Daisy's sexual preference was revealed, and not her racial identity. Moreover, Mrs. Blake's effective severing of Lai Fun and Daisy's budding relationship becomes more complex because racism toward *both* girls certainly played a part in her sabotage. By revealing Daisy's racial identity after the fact, Mayr hints at the way that discriminations overlap; she also suggests that it can be difficult to recognize those overlaps at first glance, just as Daisy's racial identity could not have figured into a reader's initial perspective on Mrs. Blake's interferences.

Mayr's deliberate, recurrent, and subtle explorations of the links between racial and sexual identity categories participate in the on-going feminist conversation around

intersectionality. Intersectionality has been defined as "the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality" (Nash 2); or alternately, as "an analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and age form mutually constructing features of social organization" (Collins *Fighting* 278). On a more colloquial register, popular *Feministing.com* blogger Jessica Valenti describes intersectionality this way: "Some folks call it intersectionality; others call it multiple oppressions; some call it the intersection of oppressions. Whatever you call it, the point is that different kinds of "-isms" (sexism, classism, racism) all intersect in a truly fucked-up way" (227).[157] Without necessarily using the term "intersectionality," African-American feminist scholarship has long explored the intersecting categories of race and gender, as evident in the critique of white, mainstream feminism described in the second chapter of this dissertation (Nash 3, Collins *Black* 16, Collins *Fighting* 115-120, Carastathis 9).[158] The term itself was coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in her work on critical race theory and gender, wherein she denounced the fact that "although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices" (357). Working in the late 1980s to help found the critical race movement in the American legal field, Crenshaw was specifically addressing the failure of American anti-discrimination laws to act against simultaneous sexual and racial discrimination in workplaces (Carastathis 13). Since the 1990s, however, interest in these

[157] The fact that Valenti addresses intersectionality in a book otherwise unconcerned with such terms is a testament to its perceived importance. Valenti discusses intersectionality in a chapter entitled "A Quick Academic Aside" because she believes that it is "something ridiculously important – that can't be missed" (227).

[158] Notably, in her seminal essay "Notes Toward a Politics of Location," Adrienne Rich quotes from a 1977 statement from the Combahee River Collective in which they offer "a clear and uncompromising Black-feminist naming to the experience of simultaneity of oppressions" (Rich *Arts* 70).

ideas, under the guise of "intersectionality," has emerged within a variety of academic disciplines (Collins *Thinking* 120). Generally speaking, intersectionality is a perspective on identity formation that emphasizes the complexity of subjectivity as it is influenced by racial, sexual, financial, etc. attributes. Parallel to this are the social and political systems that are also interacting with these interconnected identity categories in complex, overlapping ways. Intersectionality is usually used in the context of three overlapping conversations to refer to the intersections between different systems of oppression, the intersections that form a person's identity (what Crenshaw called "structural intersectionality"), and the workings of intersections in different social movements (as in the positioning of Black women in antiracist politics versus their positioning within feminist politics) (Carastathis 20). At it base, intersectionality highlights the "important insights that identity is complex, that subjectivity is messy, and that personhood is inextricably bound up with vectors of power" (Nash 13-14).

Intersectionality has been assigned a heavy task. Despite its more specific historical origins in legal theory, it has come to be seen as a solution to the racism of essentialist feminism. Thus, it is employed "virtually as a synonym for how the 'litany' of oppressions (based on axes of gender, race, class, nation, sexuality and disability) inflect and inform one another. Indeed, common usage makes it acceptable for one to refer to 'intersectionality' without specifying what, in particular, is intersecting, or how" (Carastathis 10). Implicit in this comment is a criticism of a lack of specificity in discussions that claim an intersectional perspective. Indeed, Carastathis comes down hard on intersectionality, arguing that it circulates as an abstract concept, a "blunt tool," and an alibi for actual

antiracist action (3, 29). In Patricia Hill Collins's 1998 reflections on the subject, she worries that intersectionality remains undertheorized and has limited innovative potential (211). Her concerns are echoed in a recent article by Jennifer Nash, who wonders how transformative it really is to emphasize the intersectional nature of identities. An intersectional outlook is supposed to illuminate the simultaneity of experiences of oppression, to reveal the complexities of such intersecting oppressions, and to lend insight into the irreducibility of identity (Carastathis 26). But what if it is most often used as a catch-all phrase to allude to a vague sense of the convoluted nature of overlapping oppressions? Among the recommendations calling for more specificity and more theorizing around intersectionality, Nash states that intersectionality scholars *should* be "examining how race and gender utilize differing technologies of categorization and control, disciplining bodies in distinctive ways, and coalescing (or colliding) in particular formations in certain historical, social, cultural, representational, legal and technological moments" (13). My readings of various scenes from *Venous Hum* suggest that Mayr is indeed positioning her depictions of race and gender in certain "historical, social, cultural, representational, legal and technological moments" as she considers identity in relation to the contemporary Canadian nation-state, its educational settings, and family dynamics. In an article on "Sexism, Racism and Canadian Nationalism," Roxana Ng emphasizes that racism and sexism are not only structural, but also systemic because they have "crystallized … in the ways in which business is ordinarily conducted in everyday life" (208). Ng and Nash's comments, read side by side, suggest that we might most accurately and productively consider the dynamics of race (and racism) and sex (and sexism, and

sexualities and homophobia) in a carefully contextualized picture of "everyday life" – like, for example, that afforded by Mayr's fictional, Trudeau-influenced, urban Alberta.

During Grade Twelve, Lai Fun discovers that Lloyd, the Native boy singled out by Mrs. Blake in Grade One, is gay (122). She subsequently sees him as an ally and potential confidante because they have a shared secret (80, 123, 126). The narrative even describes him as her "twin," because they both differ from a white, heterosexual norm and have acknowledged their homosexualities to each other (131). Lai Fun assumes that these similarities give rise to an automatic solidarity between them, and she feels betrayed when she discovers that Lloyd ended up marrying a woman (82, 84). In one of the novel's final moments, Lai Fun confronts Lloyd at their high school reunion by asking point-blank, "why are you married to Maureen? Why aren't you with a man? Why are you back in the closet?" (225). Lloyd's reply immediately deflates Lai Fun's sense of betrayal: "What the hell are you talking about? Maureen doesn't give a shit about who I slept with before I married her. I loved her and I still love – that's why I married her… I can sleep with who I like. I'm not afraid of what *you* think" (225). The interactions between Lai Fun and Lloyd highlight the importance of remembering the fluidity and heterogeneity that inhabit categories as vast as race or sexuality. Lai Fun made assumptions about the nature of her friendship with Lloyd based on their "differences" and she judged his sexuality according to a hetero/homo binary. This fictional anecdote cautions against assuming that individuals who identify with a marginalized group fit into certain boxes, have similar experiences, and share an automatic solidarity.[159] This speaks to what Crenshaw sees as the problem of

[159] The fact that Lai Fun and Lloyd have very different experiences of being "different" is evident even in Mayr's portrayal of their high school years, when Lloyd is popular and powerful (at least on the surface) while Lai Fun certainly is not (78-79).

identity politics: “that is frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (357). While Crenshaw hoped that intersectionality might work toward resolving this problem, intersectionality may simply be repeating the same mistake. Carastathis argues that intersectionality often “conflates experiences of oppression with the categories used to name those experiences,” meaning that while an intersectional perspective is supposed to provide insight into the complexity existing beyond singular categories such as “race” or “gender,” in actual usage such a perspective has recourse to these same unitary categories and has yet to theorize the potential transition from singular categories to intersecting ones (29). Crenshaw, Collins, Nash and many other feminist scholars clearly hope that intersectionality might sharpen and advance feminist and antiracist political causes by nuancing and revitalizing group identity politics, but the slippery question of finding non-essentialist perspectives on oppression and identity – and thus non-essentialist grounds for group solidarity – is on-going. The relationship between Lai Fun and her classmate Lloyd speaks to this question and provides a caution against the assumptions made when discussing identity categories, even those recognized as intersectional.

Lai Fun’s final conversation with Lloyd is a lesson in the irreducibility of structurally intersectional identity categories (Carastathis 20, 26). Lai Fun learns that there is not necessarily a common essence arising from shared identity categories. The novel also comments on the intersectionality of systems of oppression. For instance, when Lai Fun is preparing for the high school reunion at which she will confront Lloyd, mischievous discriminatory comments are written on her car: “LEZ FUN” and “PAKI FOON” are racist and homophobic distortions of her first name (192). Again, discourses of race and sexuality

are depicted side by side, this time in these anonymous insults. This is an example of the way that discriminations toward those who differ from a "mythical norm" might be multi-faceted and overlapping if they are "different" on multiple grounds. Mrs. Blake's interference in Lai Fun and Daisy's relationship, as described above, is a similar example of the nature of "intersectional" discrimination. But this section has also argued that we might also think about the intersectional politics of the nation state, as they attempt in parallel ways to manage different types of diversity among citizens. In addition, it is important to note that cultivating an eye for intersectionality is not just about recognizing the way that deviance is imposed or multiplicity is managed; a sense of the intersectionality of the aspects of one's identity might also be integral to an individual's self-definition. Audre Lorde once defined the "mythical norm" in America as "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure," before going on to define herself (intersectionally, we might say in retrospect) as a "Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity" (116, 120). She protests the fact that she is "often being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of my self" (120). The goal of intersectionality is to move beyond the "pluck[ing] out [of] some one aspect" so that the complexities of subjectivities and social formations can be acknowledged. [160] Mayr's

[160] Intersectionality studies has primarily been interested in the intersections of the identity categories of race and gender (Nash 2). However, a note on other identity categories is in order, especially since the Audre Lorde essay cited in this section is entitled "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Defining Difference." Taking class into account, alongside race and gender, has been important for the intersectional work of Patricia Hill Collins as for many African-American feminists (Collins *Black* 16). Economics are of recurring concern in *Venous Hum*, particularly through allusions to the Albertan "boom-and-bust" oil economy (114, 196, 228). However, the novel does not seem to explore class as a marker of difference in the same way that it explores issues of difference through race and sexuality. As for age, Mayr's second novel, *The Widows*, has three elderly women as central figures and age/ageism becomes a central theme.

portrayal of the interconnectedness of categories such as race and sexuality participates in this feminist project.

My point throughout the final part of this section has been to demonstrate that *Venous Hum* can be discussed in terms of the concept of intersectionality, but also that it can be read as a comment on the challenges of intersectionality theory, as articulated by concerned feminists. Because Mayr's characters provide insight into the simultaneity, complexity and irreducibility of identity categories and their attendant discriminations, the novel confirms that there is indeed a need for specificity and vigilance when feminists discuss difference. Like feminists who refer to intersectionality without a serious engagement with its intricacies, Lai Fun made simplistic assumptions about Lloyd, even as her own self and situations repeatedly alert the reader to the complexities of subjectivities and interpellations. Although intersectionality theory provides some vocabulary with which to discuss *Venous Hum*, the action of the novel moves the discussion beyond simply naming "race" or "gender" or "sexuality" and stating their overlaps. Rather, feminists must investigate, in our reading of Mayr's novel as in our use of intersectionality theory, the intersections that are so slippery that they are difficult to articulate, and the endlessly shifting and internally-diverse categories used to designate aspects of identity.

Monsters and Cannibalism

In order to delve deeper into the politics of *Venous Hum*, especially as they relate to immigration and multiculturalism, it is absolutely necessary to consider the central figure of the monster, which Mayr makes ironic use of in order to explore the complexities of

assimilation and inclusion. *Venous Hum* is in keeping with the many contemporary monster narratives that provide insight into the cultures, ideologies, and social systems that are their contexts. Andrew Hock-Soon Ng, in his work on monstrosity in contemporary texts explains that, "Sophisticated monster narratives often provide searching commentaries about the way culture and ideology work. These narratives show how monstrosity is profoundly interrelated with the culture that produces, camouflages, marginalises and resists it" (1). The primary monstrous characteristic of the freaks of *Venous Hum* is their cannibalism. In *The CanLit FoodBook*, Margaret Atwood devotes an entire chapter to cannibalism, of which she says there is a surprising amount (both actual and metaphorical) in Canadian literature (4). By portraying contemporary Canadian citizens as clandestine cannibals, *Venous Hum* engages with this trope; it also comes into conversation with a variety of colonial and postcolonial discourses related to cannibalism. In colonial history, cannibalism has been a label used to construct hierarchical differences between people groups and to justify domination (Kilgour 240). Postcolonial scholar Bill Ashcroft states that, "The central concept of colonial abjection is cannibalism – the absolute sign of the other in imperial thought. It was invented by Christopher Colmbus, three centuries before the invention of race, and it is the central trope of the colonial myth of savagery" (45). In response to the colonial deployment of cannibalism to establish difference and superiority, the figure of the cannibal in contemporary narratives most likely serves to *de*construct those differences (Kilgour 242). That is, in contemporary monster narratives, monsters are often returning the dominant gaze (A. Ng 12) and calling into question their imposed otherness. In *Venous Hum*, the monsters invite us to consider who is constructed as monstrous,

whether or not there are any "real" monsters, and what the monsters imply about inclusion and assimilation as it relates to categories of sexuality, gender, race, and national identities.

Mayr's use of the monster topos suits her overall project of cultural critique.[161] It also fits with her tone and genre, specifically the satiric and magic realist elements of her prose. Rosi Braidotti discusses the connections between monstrosity and satire, arguing that "the satirical text is implicitly monstrous, it is a deviant, an aberration in itself" (80). Braidotti notes that it is particularly common for classic satirical texts to portray women as monsters, even going so far as to "express a degree of misogyny that might shock in other literary genres" (80). Because Mayr's novel also depicts monstrous women – minus the misogyny, of course – it doubles its own satirical reach by becoming not only a satire of elements of contemporary Canada, but also a satire of earlier satires that make sexist use of monstrous women. The connection between monsters and women is a crucial one. Theorists of literary monstrosity often note that monsters are depicted as female (or females are depicted as monsters) because they both represent an "other" (woman, monster) that is not the "norm" (man, human). An archetypal female monster such as Medusa or the myth of the vagina dentata spring to mind. Braidotti describes it this way: "The monstrous as the negative pole, the pole of pejoration, is structurally analogous to the feminine as that which is other-than the established norm, whatever the norm may be" (80). It is not surprising,

[161] Her use of monsters may also be related to the Prairie setting of *Venous Hum*. In the Acknowledgements section of *Venous Hum*, Mayr mentions her indebtedness to Aritha van Herk's *Mavericks: An Incorrigible History of Alberta*. Van Herk's work includes a chapter entitled "Bread and Circuses, Culture and Bigotry" in which she discusses the Albertan love of circuses, and specifically of the excesses of circuses. She writes, "Culture in Alberta has always been confused with sport and spectacle. We don't like our culture lying on a plate, boring and passive. We want it alive, biting back, an articulation of our love for carnival, for excess and excitement" (327). This supposed Albertan penchant for excess, carnival, spectacle and circus can be related to the freaks of *Venous Hum* … and van Herk's reference to "biting back" is particularly fitting in light of what Louve does to Thor in *Venous Hum*!

therefore, to find Ng claiming that, "contemporary monster narratives often ascribe the traumatised, haunted, and monstrous body to the feminine" (A. Ng 14) or to note that Milly Williamson and Barbara Creed agree that the figure of the vampire is always the monstrous feminine (Williamson 12). In *Venous Hum*, many of the monsters are women, and the situations in which they find themselves do relate to important feminist issues of desire and consumption, as detailed below. Notably, the prevalence of pregnancy in the novel also relates to the monstrous female, because in pregnancy, a woman's body "defeats the notion of fixed bodily form" as it expands and changes (Braidotti 80). Because the very definition of monstrosity hinges on bodies that somehow defy what has been defined as normative (A. Ng 144), the pregnant body is particularly susceptible to being labelled monstrous (Williamson 12, Braidotti 80, Pearson 78). In a novel that is very concerned with the perceived monsters among us, readers are repeatedly reminded of the shifting awkwardness of pregnant bodies (20, 37, 193, 211). This figures as part of Mayr's overall project of calling attention to different bodies and their supposed deviance.

In the context of Canadian women's writing, a list of notable female monsters could include, for instance, the giantess Anna Swan from Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* or the undead Mrs. Potter from Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*. Brief comparisons illustrate the way in which Mayr's use of monstrosity is both in response to, and a departure from, earlier depictions. On the one hand, similar terms might be used to describe both Mayr and Swan's novels insofar as both interrogate "official discourses" and examine the link between "Woman and freak, [categories that] are reserved for those who transgress socially determined boundaries based on the norm," as Marlene Goldman says of

The Biggest Modern Woman of the World (76, 95). On the other hand, the female monstrosity of Swan's novel is understood almost entirely in terms of the difference between male and female (Goldman 64-65, 74), whereas *Venous Hum* works from an anti-essentialism that moves beyond a second-wave feminist understanding of sexual difference as primordial. The idea of "parodic appropriation," seen in Swan's text when Anna internalizes and appropriates the discourses of her giant-ness (Goldman 69), could also be used in regards to *Venous Hum*, when Louve effectively becomes the monstrous other that she is perceived to be (as I discuss below). Yet these texts are in some ways worlds apart: for instance, the lesbian sexuality so central to *Venous Hum* is glaringly – and perhaps problematically – absent from *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (Goldman 75). As for *Venous Hum* and *The Double Hook*, the most basic similarity would be that both of these Prairie novels depict undead women (Mrs. Potter and Mrs. Blake) who represent their communities unhealthy tendencies (Grube 78, Atwood *Survival* 41). Nonetheless, other themes and the aesthetics and tones of the novels are extremely dissimilar. Mayr is certainly working with(in) certain traditions and tropes, but along with her contemporaries Larissa Lai and Hiromi Goto she also departs from (or adds to, or radicalizes) those traditions and tropes through her anti-essentialist satire. Indeed, Mayr associates the vampires of *Venous Hum* with Goto's kappas (the "monsters" of *The Kappa Child*) or with van Herk's zombies (the "monsters" of *Restlessness*) (Mayr "Vampires" 331).

Another literary trend relevant to *Venous Hum* is that of magic realism in its international and Canadian manifestations. Although magic realism has sometimes proved difficult to define, especially as it has travelled internationally, its main features are often

taken to be the juxtaposition of "marvellous objects and events with the quotidian aspects of daily live," coupled with a politics of post-colonial, anti-totalitarianism, marginalized resistance (Andrews 2-3). Discussions of magic realism in a specifically Canadian context emerged in the 1970s and 1980s (Andrews 1). Some of the attributes ascribed to Canadian magic realism are consistent with Mayr's use of this literary mode, particularly: the supernatural appearing in daily life, her use of hyperbole presented as fact, elements of parody, moments of meta-fiction, allusions to a clash between Old and New Worlds, and politics that critique centralizing or essentialist discourses (Andrews 5). In an interview published in 2006, Mayr speaks of how "magic realism enables you to explore your place… even if it comes across as this completely magical kind of thing, it's just a further extension of the real" (Thomas 168).[162] That is, for Mayr, as for practitioners of magic realism the world over, magic realism is not about fanciful escapes into the fabulous; rather, incorporating fantastical elements into narratives of everyday life is a way to engage more deeply with the everyday, as it is formed by a variety of questionable social, economic and political systems.

Having established that Mayr's monsters can be read in a context that evokes rich traditions of satire, female monstrosity and magic realism, the rest of this section will focus on a handful of key scenes from the novel that deal with issues of assimilation and

[162] In light of this chapter's discussion of Canadian Prairie writing and regionalism, it is pertinent to note that Mayr discusses Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said* within this conversation on magic realism. Indeed, *What the Crow Said* is often identified as a quintessential example of Canadian magic realism and Canadian magic realism generally is often associated primarily with Western or West-Coast-based settings (Andrews 6, 7). Mayr says that for Kroetsch, magic realism as a "way to examine the myths around Alberta and how Alberta was constructed" (Thomas 168). As a fellow Prairie writer, albeit of a new generation, Mayr's magic realism connects with Kroetsch's insofar as she is also investigating myths and constructions related to a specific Canadian context. *What the Crow Said* is also invested in the deconstruction of binary structures, such as gender (Andrews 8), which rings true for *Venous Hum* as well.

inclusion through the figure of the postcolonial cannibalistic freak. Although the novel is replete with allusions to monstrosity from the very beginning (15, 54, 82, etc.), it is not until the halfway point that certain characters are revealed to be cannibalistic vampires. It may come as no surprise that the first character who is exposed as literally monstrous is Mrs. Blake. One day during Grade One recess, Mrs. Blake sinks her teeth into Lai Fun's neck, causing her to scratch Mrs. Blake in retaliation, and urinate in her pants out of fear of being sent the principal's office. When Louve and Fritz-Peter come to fetch Lai Fun, they question Mrs. Blake's teaching credentials and accuse of her sucking the children's blood (as per Lai Fun's reports). In a meta-fictional moment that resonates in numerous ways, Mrs. Blake denies responsibility by replying, "What am I, a walking metaphor?" (101). In discussing the racism that Mrs. Blake brandishes in the classroom, we might state, *metaphorically*, that she is attacking the children, sucking the blood out of them, consuming their otherness, and training them to feel fear in connection with the embodied selves. We might say that Mrs. Blakes's mistreatment of children is "monstrous;" we might even exclaim, "She's a monster!" Therefore, when Mrs. Blake *literally* attacks, sucks, consumes and instils fear, and *is* a monster, she performs what Mayr describes as a magic realist "making the real an apt metaphor for describing something" "so even if it comes across as this completely magical kind of thing, it's just a further extension of the real" (Thomas 168). By actualizing the metaphors that could be used to describe the destructivity of Mrs. Blake's racism, Mayr illuminates the gravity of her actions, especially as her monstrosity appears to clash with her demure appearance. She is described as "that Creamsicle of a woman with her blonde, perfect page-by" (98) and yet "All the kids know that Mrs. Blake,

head of the English-speaking teachers, silent in her rubber-soled beige shoes, is a monster. All the kids know it" (103). She incarnates a metaphor for racism and discrimination that are both camouflaged and palpable.

Yet monstrosity in *Venous Hum* is not only used to condemn characters that are the novel's antagonists. That is, while Mrs. Blake might be portrayed as a monster because she is hateful and hateable, other characters are monstrous for very different reasons, thereby challenging expectations about the trope of cannibalism. In an interview in *This Magazine*, Mayr explains that it felt fitting to portray some of the novel's non-European immigrant characters as vampires because, "'Ultimately the big fear of immigrants is that they will take away your jobs, and if they do that, you can't eat and ultimately you die. The fear of immigrants is the fear of them killing you" ("Fang"). Her comment echoes Bannerji's analysis of depictions of immigrants in Canadian media. Bannerji argues that mainstream media, and the state, often present low-income, non-white immigrants as "the problem" and as "those people who took away our jobs" (*Dark* 78).[163] Mayr explores the connection between visibility, immigration and monstrosity in the scene during which Louve reveals her blood-thirsty ways. Thor (Lai Fun's arrogant, womanizing, alcoholic, extramarital lover) has been pestering Louve and is intrigued by the imagined exoticism of her life story. "Where do you really come from, Louve?" he asks, "You're not from here… Don't you ever want to go back home, Louve?" (176). In response, Louve "bares her teeth. I am home, she says. I was *invited*" (176). Time seems to pause for an instant and the narrative

[163] The fact that the state might present non-white immigrants as a problem contradicts their other discourse – that of official multiculturalism – in which non-white immigrants function as commodities displayed to demonstrate the health and harmony of the Canadian nation-state. In addition to suggesting the hypocrisy or fickleness of the state, this contradiction serves as another reminder that the politics of the visible include both invisibility and hypervisibility and that the dream deficit of multiculturalism is inherent within the state's own discourse vis-à-vis immigrants to Canada.

skips from one character to another, describing what each is doing at exactly this moment before Louve strikes (176-177). Then Louve bites off Thor's finger, jumps on his neck, and sucks his blood until he dies (177-178). The action is narrated in a matter-of-fact tone, heightening the sense of surprise and gore. When Louve calls Fritz-Peter at work to tell him what has happened, and to suggest that they organize a dinner party in order to consume the body, Fritz-Peter alludes to their repressed monstrous past: "You mean *keep* the body? *We're not like that anymore*. Fritz-Peter hates italics. He never speaks in italics except in extreme situations. Yes! A dinner party. We haven't eaten meat in almost thirty years" (180). And so readers learn that Lai Fun's parents are reformed cannibalistic vampires, now vegetarians.

What is at stake in this strange and crucial scene? As mentioned above, depictions of cannibalism cannot help but enter into conversation with colonial discourse that mobilised cannibalism as the extreme marker of cultural difference (Ashcroft 45, Gunew 167). In order to gain support for expanding empires, empirical discourse pointed to cannibalism as proof of a *colonized* culture's inferiority and savagery in order to justify the *colonizing* culture's superiority and right to domination (Kilgour 239). By revealing that Louve and Fritz-Peter are cannibals, Mayr is playing on the colonial understanding of cannibalism with much irony, in order to interrogate perceptions of non-white immigrants as threatening and inherently *other*. When Thor insists that Louve could not possibly belong to the nation-state that she has joyfully claimed as her own, he designates her as irretrievably abject, other, and different, outside of his concept of Canadian. He wants her to be the type of unidimensional diasporic citizen of his fantasies. It is as this moment that

Louve reveals her actual freakish difference. Because Thor's perspective places the non-white immigrant in the position of the other, it is ironic that Louve reveals herself as literally other by taking revenge on Thor through monstrous violence. Thor, along with Mrs. Blake and the man with the camera, perceive Louve as racially other, and Mayr takes their assumptions and literalizes them, portraying Louve as both monster and cannibal (except that she is otherwise entirely loveable aging woman in tube socks, with "pendulous, wrinkly breasts" and "a saggy, bloated belly" 160, 178). Mayr plays with the notion that a fear of otherness is ultimately a fear of being killed and consumed. In *Venous Hum*, this is exactly what happens: Louve acts out her frustration and revenge by killing and consuming the character who blindly insists on her difference. Maggie Kilgour's perspective on the nature of narrative cannibalism illuminates this dynamic. Kilgour comments that, "cannibalism is…a means of demystification, a satiric weapon which literalises in order to expose" (259). In *Venous Hum*, cannibalism is indeed a satiric weapon that demystifies and exposes racist discourse and its bases in fear and colonial history. Whereas Mrs. Blake is portrayed as monstrous in order to highlight the gravity of her destructive ideologies, Louve is depicted as a freak in order to highlight the absurdity of those who would assume her otherness or monstrosity based on her skin colour.

A reading of Louve's cannibalism must also take into account the workings of consumption and assimilation in her encounter with Thor, as those themes ultimately relate back to the nation and its others. Sneja Gunew notes that, "to designate someone a cannibal is to mark them as abject, beyond the pale" (174). Yet Gunew also points out that the trope of cannibalism narrates both repulsion *and* fascination between two individuals or groups;

vampires are also often related to sexual desire (167). Throughout *Venous Hum*, Thor is increasingly sexually attracted to Louve and on the day that she kills him, he has arrived at her apartment in hopes of seducing her. There is a striking contrast, as well as a metaphorical similarity, between the kind of bodily union that he desires (sexual) and the kind of bodily union that Louve wreaks (through violence and ingestion), recalling the "familiar cannibalistic motif in relation to incorporation as sexual union" (Gunew 170). "I want to get inside you," Thor says to Louve, and by taking his body into her's through ingestion rather than through sexual penetration, Louve refuses to act as his exoticized object of desire and condemns and punishes his objectification and exoticization of her. But Louve's vengeful attack is fitting not only because of the metaphorical parallels between his desire (to consume) and her response (to consume), but also because his rejection of her "Canadianness" is ultimately a refusal to see her as incorporated into his concept of nationhood, to which she responds by incorporating him as thoroughly as is physically possible. While he assures her that there is no way for her to be assimilated, she literally assimilates him. The link between her citizenship and her treatment of Thor is highlighted by the jubilation she experiences as she prepares to eat Thor's remains. Excited by the prospect of a "wonderful meal" with friends, Louve sings out loud on her way home from work "in the direction of home, in the direction of the pink clouds, the bubbling, chinooking Prairie sky" (186). The section ends with Louve's evocation of "Canada, the land of liberation;" the chapter then concludes with recipes for deep-fried human fingers and brain fritters. The juxtaposition of Louve's patriotic glee and her humourous cannibalistic recipes confirms the links between Louve's vampiric cannibalism and Thor's

assumptions about her citizenship. This instance of cannibalism is indeed a strange mix of repulsion and fascination: because Thor is attracted to someone he sees as inherently other, and also because Louve ultimately derives pleasure from a situation in which she felt trapped and angry.

Louve's vampirism also relates to issues of assimilation because she and Fritz-Peter are *reformed* vampire cannibals. The narrative reaveals that, "they were getting too old to deal with hiding bodies and making up stories and moving… They wanted to live in one place for a long time. Put down roots deep into the earth and live normal, boring suburban lives forever" (179). The idea that Louve and Fritz-Peter must abandon parts of their pasts in order to become rooted in a new place echoes debates about immigration and assimilation, debates that often hinge on questions of how much of a native culture can be brought into an adopted culture. What percentage of cultural identity must be repressed in order to belong in a new nation? What is the relationship between "Canadian culture" and the varied cultural backgrounds of immigrants to Canada? These questions have certainly been prominent within Canadian conversations on the workings of multiculturalism and diasporic populations (as seen, for instance, in the recent "*accomodements raisonnables*" debates in Québec)[164] and they are embodied in the lives of Louve and Fritz-Peter, reformed vampires, now "normal", suburban Albertans… who ironically revert back to cannibalism when their normalcy is questioned! In her study of cannibalism in colonial texts, Rebecca Weaver-Hightower notes that there is often a distinction made between "irredeemable"

[164] Following a flurry of debate in the public sphere over the extent to which traditional *franco-québécois* culture should "accommodate" other various cultural practices, the provincial government set up the *Commission de consultation sur les pratique d'accomodement reliées aux differences culturelles* to study the issues. See their official site at http://www.accommodements.qc.ca/.

cannibals and "reformed" cannibals, with "reformed" cannibals being those who have left their human-eating ways behind and have therefore gained the hesitant trust of the colonist (97). In her discussion of *Robinson Crusoe*, Weaver-Hightower notes that Crusoe allows a reformed cannibal (and a reformed pirate) onto his island: that is, he incorporates or assimilates those whom he initially feared would literally incorporate him (93, 99). Mayr's depiction of reformed cannibals evokes this colonial discourse and therefore invites readers to note the on-going legacy of colonial paradigms in contemporary nation-states that continue to evalute which "cannibals" have "reformed," and which are "irredeemable," to use Weaver-Hightower's terms. Yet it is also important to note that Louve and Fritz-Peter's decision to leave cannibalism behind (insofar as it signifies a rejection of a past culture) is presented as a choice they make of their own volition, in accordance with their own sense of well-being and their desire to "live normal, boring suburban lives forever" (189). It represents the way in which they are not at all the diasporic citizens imagined by Lily Cho to be in an "agonized relationship to home" (99). Obviously, some immigrants to Canada would identify with Cho's description; Mayr's novel, as usual, invites us to quesiton our assumptions and anti-essentialize our preconceptions.

I have argued that cannibalism is a fitting motif for the encounter between Louve and Thor because of the sexual dynamics of the scene but principally because of the theme of assimilation into the nation-state. When Thor insists on a certin type of irrefutable difference between himself and Louve, based on his exoticization of her, Louve's recourse to cannibalism both reinforces and dissolves that difference. Maggie Kilgour notes that "Cannibalism involves both the *establishing* of absolute difference, the opposites of eater

and eaten, and the *dissolution* of that difference, through the act of incorporation which identifies them, and makes the two one" (Kilgour 240). Studies of cannibalism often explain that although cannibalism between enemies (refered to as "native cannibalism," as opposed to the "survival cannibalism" of those with no access to food - Weaver-Hightower 118) is about vengeance and conquering, there is also a sense in which the cannibal *wants* to incorporate parts of the enemy in order to absorb the other's strength (Weaver-Hightower 116, Vieira 98) or to gain access to their secret knowledge (Harris 106-7). Thor does not seem to have secret knowledge or strength that would benefit Louve although she does ultimately derive pleasure from consuming him (227). Weaver-Hightower uses this concept of gaining an enemies strength to turn the gaze back on the colonizers as the actual cannibals, because the fantasy of taking in an other's strength and knowledge is "uncannily analogous to the reality of colonizers who, by plundering the resources (raw materials, labor, national treasures) of the colonies the controlled, consumed, and fought over, strengthened their own economies" (116). In this sense, Thor, and by extension the narrow-minded view of Canada that he represents, is the actual cannibal threat, and Louve's cannibal retaliation is frivolous in comparison. Seen in this light, her's is perhaps a "survival cannibalism" after all – not because she must eat him to survive, but because Thor would have consumed her had she not acted against him. Ultimately, this crucial scene starring Louve and Thor demonstrates that the on-going resonance of the colonial deployment of cannibalistic discourse is more complicated than a simple inferior/superior, cannibal/colonist binary. Instead it brings up the complex workings of consumption, desire

and assimilation as they inform the relationship between the nation-state, its colonists, citizens and immigrants.

Although the cannibalistic Thor-feast comes at the novel's conclusion, *Venous Hum*'s climactic scene is Lai Fun's high school reunion, at which monsters also take centre stage, again in relation to themes of assimilation and inclusion. As mentioned previously, Lai Fun confronts Lloyd at the reunion, but only succeeds in displaying her simplistic, binary conception of his sexuality. The reunion also provides occasion for Lai Fun to consider her own stance on diversity and inclusion. Surveying the crowd from her vantage point as official co-organiser of the event, Lai Fun notes that many of the classmates that attend the reunion are already dead (211). Her first instinct is to label them "bloody crashers" (211) and to worry that they will "hog the buffet table" (212). However, amidst her sense that they do not deserve admittance ("they weren't officially invited… they got in free!" 212), Lai Fun reasons that they might as well participate ("on the other hand, why shouldn't they come?" 211), and she does not want to hurt their feelings by kicking them out (212). The scene is quasi-allegorical: the reunion represents a microcosmic nation-state, with Lai Fun as an official administrator concerned about limited resources, population control, and the price of belonging. The phrase "officially invited," which Lai Fun uses to distinguish between the dead and the living reunioners, has echoed throughout the novel in relation to Canadian multiculturalism and citizenship. Canada is described as having "brought in an official Policy of Multiculturalism that proclaimed, Bonjour, you are invited" (11) and Louve tells Thor that Canada is indeed her home because she has been "invited" (176). Lai Fun's qualms about the uninvited reunion guests can be read as a

parody of the fear of refugees or illegal immigrants, portrayed as undeserving of admittance ("but they got in free!") and as illegitimate recipients of limited resources ("hog the buffet table"). Although this may be a moment in which Lai Fun is forced to confront her own tendencies toward self-protection and discrimination, it is ultimately a scene that deflates such tendencies generally, because Lai Fun's disapproval is largely apathetic and short-lived. Her reflections even suggest that what officialdom might seek to protect with such urgency and patriotism is maybe not that fantastic to begin with: "of course the dead have come – only the dead would have boring enough lives to *look forward* to a high school reunion" (212).[165]

One member of the undead to show up at the high school reunion is Mrs. Blake, and her presence poses difficult questions about the limits of inclusion and the possibilities of reconciliation. Suddenly Mrs. Blake is also included in the "invitation" and she rises up out of her grave in Louve's rose garden (here we learn that Louve killed Mrs. Blake years before 220) to the echo, "You are invited, you are invited… she has been invited and the inviting pulls her up through the ground" (217). If the reunion is a microcosmic nation-state, then on one level it makes sense for Mrs. Blake to be in attendance, as she represents a particular viewpoint regarding the Canadian nation-state. But Mrs. Blake is also there so that Lai Fun can confront her childhood tormentor. Like her confrontation with Lloyd, Lai Fun's final interaction with Mrs. Blake is fairly anticlimactic; in fact, it no longer even seems as if Mrs. Blake is the one real detestable monster of the novel. Thinking about Mrs.

[165] This rhetorical strategy (of downplaying the desirability of admittance to the reunion – or, by extension, to Canada) is amusing and effective, and it gives pause. However, it is also problematic in that it may be disrespectful to suggest that Canada is undesirable when many immigrants go to great lengths to live here, often at great financial, professional and personal cost.

Blake before she arrives, Lai Fun feels frantic and protective of her unborn child (218), and when she sees her, she feels as though she is drowning, choking and losing her balance (216). This intense reaction corresponds to the damage that Mrs. Blake inflicted on Lai Fun doing her school years, when she was "the Queen Wasp of Lai Fun's school-time misery" (220). Yet the lesson that Lai Fun learns at the reunion is that she needs to "get over" Mrs. Blake. One former classmate tells Lai Fun that in relation to Mrs. Blake she needs to, "Snap. Out. Of. It. That was over twenty years ago" (216). And this is apparently what happens. Lai Fun, struck by Mrs. Blake's fragility and her diminutive size (220-221), is "happy that she's finally realized she's thirty-eight and no longer eight, Mrs Blake just a woman, a woman with claws and fangs, but still essentially just a woman" (224). A superficial reading might argue that Mayr is granting too much impunity to Mrs. Blake, or that she does a disservice in suggesting that racism can be brushed off so easily and resolved in such tidy fashion. Indeed, Mayr defies her readers' desire for a conclusion that either punishes Mrs. Blake or grants an emotional reconciliation. I would argue that this final portrait of Mrs. Blake does not erase the severity of what she represented earlier in the novel; rather it denies her the final word by diminishing her monstrosity until she is pathetic. Her destructive influence on the "different" children of her class – called "the Orange Group" – is not deterministic. Her racism is not granted the final word, and this is highlighted by the fact that the song "I Will Survive," played on repeat, is the background music to this final encounter (216, 221). The scene ends with the Orange Group dominating the dance floor ("The dumbo kids from the Orange Group. Dancing in the centre of attention" 213) while everyone ignores the Popular People's attempt to reminisce fondly

about *The Mikado* (214). Mrs. Blake climbs into the sky, resolving to dance more (225). This conclusion is perhaps unexpected, even anti-climactic, and yet it carries a serious message about racism conquered, denied, exposed, deflated. The monster is rendered impotent, almost inconsequential, and the marginalized dominate the dancefloor for once.

Atwood and Mayr: Canadian Women Writers and Their Cannibals

After this reading of the novel's monsters, it is appropriate to return to one of *Venous Hum*'s epigraphs: "Florence Nightingale was a cannibal, you know," cited from Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. In this final section, I explore the intertextual connections between *Venous Hum* and *The Edible Woman*, building on my thoughts about how *Venous Hum* can be positioned in terms of monsters, feminism and Canadian women's writing. Although it may not seem obvious at first glance, there are multiple thematic and generic links to be made between *Venous Hum* and *The Edible Woman*, published thirty-six years apart, on opposite chronological ends of the second-wave feminist movement. In terms of genre, both novels may confidently be identified as social satire. In fact, when Mayr's epigraph points back to Atwood's text, one of Atwood's epigraphs references Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, a classic example of social satire (Parker 127). More importantly, all three texts make use of symbolic cannibalism to further their political and social commentary: Swift suggests that the English eat Irish babies as a gourmet delicacy, Atwood's heroine eats a woman-shaped cake in a climactic scene, and Mayr portrays the cannibalistic dinner party. *Venous Hum* and *The Edible Woman* have other common characteristics: both are replete with imagery of mouths and teeth, for example, and both

offer commentary on contemporary realities of marriage and motherhood in urban Canada. [166] However, the most productive point of overlap and comparison is around their uses of symbolic cannibalism. Indeed, this is the connection emphasized in Mayr's allusions to *The Edible Woman*, through her choice of epigraph, but also through the repeated use of the unusual term "cake-hole" (as a synonym for mouth) in *Venous Hum* (45, 155, 159, 222). The first time that the term is employed, Mayr makes sure that it very noticeable for readers, using it in three consecutive sentences and even having Louve comment on her own choice of vocabulary: "cake-hole (she has no idea where this phrase comes from, probably her teenage-boy colleagues at work, it just popped out)" (45). The allusion is to the culminating, much-discussed scene in *The Edible Woman,* when Marion bakes a woman-shaped cake, offers it to her fiancé, and then eats it herself (315-322).

How does the symbolic cannibalism of *The Edible Woman* resonate with the cannibalistic dinner party in *Venous Hum*? Critical interpretations of Atwood's woman-shaped cake are varied, although there is general consensus that it is a symbol related to the theme of consumption and to the protagonist's gendered identity (Bouson 35-36).[167] That is, the cake may function as a symbolic comment on the protagonist's own status: she feels that she has been transformed into an object, available for consumption through marriage and motherhood as dictated by the dominant misogynist discourse of her context (Bouson 32). Marion's eventual consumption of the cake (perhaps more accurately identified as self-

[166] Other points of convergence emerge as well, and warrant more lengthy exploration. For example, both novels have hints of the Gothic, as seen in the engagement scene in *The Edible Woman* (Patton 236) and in *Venous Hum*'s use of the vampire tradition and griffin imagery.

[167] Notwithstanding those who argue that the cake is not a profound symbol at all (Rule 44)! It is interesting to note that even within the pages of the novel, various characters offer different interpretations of the cake: Marion presents it to her fiancé as a substitute of her self (320), whereas he reads it as a testiment to her unsuitability as his future wife (Keith 104). Additionally, Marion's roomate Ainsley sees the cake as Marion's rejection of her own femininity (321), while Duncan simply partakes of it and pronounces it delicious (330).

cannibalism if we accept the identification between the cake and her self) has been interpreted both as a defiant action against prescribed roles for women, and as Marion's return to her prescribed place in conventional society (Bouson 35, McWilliams 80). Marilyn Patton, writing specifically about cannibalism in *The Edible Woman*, identifies the cake-eating scene as a moment of "redemptive cannibalism," wherein cannibalism is presented as a play on ritual "in a new key, self-conscious, self-deprecating, delicious" (230). Patton's comments allude to a general point of convergence with the cannibalism of *Venous Hum*, which also feels decidedly self-conscious, playful and even redemptive. The tone employed by both authors gives the impressions that in these moments of symbolic cannibalism, some tension has been (however problematically) rectified, and the tables have turned.

The critical perspective of Emma Parker, who has written about "the politics of eating" in many of Atwood's novels, is useful in identifying the power dynamics at stake in the symbolic cannibalism of *The Edible Woman*, and they connect to my own reading of *Venous Hum*'s cannibalism. Parker argues that in Atwood's novels, eating is always related to power and to politics (113). For her, symbolic cannibalism must be examined in terms of the relationship between eater and eaten, taking into account their positions of power, control, domination and otherness (Parker 126-127). In *The Edible Woman*, this means thinking about Marion's cake-eating in relation to to her social positioning as a woman. Questions arise concerning her status under patriarchy, and the signficance of her consumption of the cake meant to reference her own objectification. In other words, the issues brought up through Atwood's symbolic cannibalism relate to power dynamics,

assimilation, and ojectification. I have analyzed the symbolic cannibalism of *Venous Hum* in these same terms, reading Thor's objectification of Louve, the parallels between ingestion and cultural assimilation, and the power dynamics of consumed / consumer as they are perturbed by the cannibalistic melding of bodies. That is, the symbolic cannibalism of both novels enact social critique concerning how people are rendered other, different, powerless, assimilated, objectified, and/or eaten. In *The Edible Woman*, this conversation is largely a critique of patriarchy and of the management of marriage, motherhood and the job market, whereas *Venous Hum* is using the same register of terms and symbolism to raise questions of national identity, immigration, racism and desire. In *The Edible Woman*, symbolic cannibalism speaks of the bonds of marriage as they might assimilate or consume the female partner; in *Venous Hum*, marriage between same-sex couples is a given, and the symbolic cannibalism has more to do what we might call "other otherness-es" – othernesses that intersect with gender, and without which an understanding of gendered identity would be incomplete. The intersections of these "other otherness-es," or multiple identity categories is a primary concern of anti-essentialist, transnational and third wave feminism.

The symbolic cannibalism of *The Edible Woman* is one instance of Atwood alluding to that which is freakish. In fact, other moments and characters in Atwood's *oeuvre* can be read in terms of the ghostly and monstrous, from the ghosts of *Surfacing* that Eli Mandel identified in his 1977 "Atwood Gothic," to the vampiric Zenia in *The Robber Bride* (Palumbo 73-86, Perrakis 151), to the post-apocolyptic figures of *Oryx and Crake*. Cynthia Sugars has recently read *Surfacing* as a "post-colonial ghost story," arguing that alongside the narrator's quest to confront her personal ghosts (related to an abortion and to her father)

is the search for Canada's "authentic national zeitgeist or spirit" (139). Sugars declares that, "Ghosts, for Atwood, emblematize something integral to the Canadian national psyche" (151). How fascinating to note the way that *Surfacing* links the ghostly and the nation-state in comparison to Mayr's depiction of the monstrous and the nation-state in *Venous Hum*! Atwood's own early work on monsters in Canadian literature suggests that it is interesting to note what kinds of monsters appear over the years. In her 1977 essay "Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction," she traces the occurrence of several types of monstrous figures (the wendigo, Coyote, the semi-human, and the magician) and places them into "a rough paradigm, which, curiously, corresponds to the order in which the respective books were written" (252). While acknowledging that "such a critical pattern exists in the mind of the critic rather than in the external world," Atwood does connect the evolution of monstrous figures in Canadian texts to "patterns and changes in Canadian society and outlook" (252). What if there were a similar timeline for monsters in Canadian women's writing, incorporating the freakish characters from Atwood's fiction and moving on towards that of Mayr? Referencing characters such as Swan's giant Anna and Watson's undead Mrs. Potter, and moving toward Hiromi Goto's *Hopeful Monsters* and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, such a timeline could reveal the way that the trope of the monstrous female has travelled over the course of second and third wave feminism in Canadian women's writing.

The Edible Woman has been identified as a "*feminist* social satire [because] it takes particular aim at the way society has institutionalized methods of marginalizing and disempowering women" (Cooke 31). In fact, Atwood herself specifies that *The Edible*

Woman is more accurately classified as "protofeminist rather than feminist" because she wrote it in 1965, before the rise of second-wave feminism in Canada (*Second* 370). *Venous Hum*, published in 2004, is situated on the other side of that wave. Its primary concerns lie with the racial, sexual and national identities of gendered bodies, themes which are readily identifiable with third wave feminism, antiracist and antiessentialist feminism. Third wave feminists often describe their feminism as having been profoundly influenced by diasporas, multiculturalism, queer movements, struggles for racial justice, and a deep sense of the ambiguities and multiplicities of women's identities (Schriefer). The intersectionality depicted in *Venous Hum* certainly dramatizes such issues, and is undeniably different from the the "protofeminism" of *The Edible Woman*. By placing these two texts in conversation with each other through my reading of their common usage of symbolic cannibalism, I am suggesting that the journey from one kind of feminist novel to another is noteworthy and revelatory of the shifting concerns of feminism in Canadian literature. These are examples of the kinds of texts that can be read in dialogue with one another in order to create a nuanced genealogy of the feminist concerns of Canadian women's writing.

"As a good Canadian kid," says Suzette Mayr in an interview, "I read Margaret Atwood, and loved her work, loved the sarcasm" (Thomas 172). This comment affirms the sense that Mayr's intertextual allusions to Atwood are meant to express a certain indebtedness and to respectfully position her own novel in relationship with Atwood's. *Venous Hum* does not supersede *The Edible Woman*, but a reading of *Venous Hum* does offer new ways to conceive of how feminism is expressed in Canadian women's writing, just as third wave feminism at its best performs respectful and productive critiques of the

second wave. This is, more generally speaking, indicative of the offerings of *Venous Hum*. In the midst of the monsters and humour, Mayr insists that her intentions are "utterly serious" (Thomas 171) as she inspires readers to reconsider institutionalized discourses, whether those of literary regionalism or of official multiculturalism or of heteronormativity. Mayr has described her narrative technique as "putting across really heavy messages by making them funny so that people accidentally swallow the pill" (Thomas 171). Through close readings of Mayr's entertaining characters and witty prose, the work of this chapter has been to identify some of those "heavy messages" and to consider their implications in literary, regional, national, and feminist contexts.

Literary and Collaborative Communities : Summation and Conclusion

Venous Hum concludes with two scenes that present images of eclectic communities. The first is the high school reunion, attended by an assorted bunch of middle-aged acquaintances, both alive and undead. The second is the more intimate cannibalistic dinner party, composed of Louve and Fritz-Peter's immediate family and friends from the past. The bases for belonging and the grounds for communication in these scenes are various but can be reduced to the fact that the participants have a shared history in a particular place, and invitations have thus been extended. Beyond this, and their decision to attend, there is no common essence among these people. Indeed, a radical anti-essentialism that considers the poststructuralist deconstruction of the fixed subject would argue that any articulation of common essence is suspect. Yet people form groups and networks, tell stories to describe a mutual sense of national belonging, mobilize together around issues or causes. What might constitute, then, an anti-essentialist articulation of their "grounds for telling it" together? More specifically, how does feminism, a movement for justice and equality that also has a history of ethnocentrism, racism and imperialism, conceive of and empower itself with imagination and integrity?

My contention throughout this dissertation has been that Canadian literature has something to say about this query. The texts that I have read demonstrate that Canadian women's writing and literary history intervene in debates about the relevance of poststructuralism for feminist thought, nuance the important feminist concept of a politics of location, emphasize the complexities of complicity, interrogate the inclusion/exclusion

of various transnational borders, insist on the on-going resonances of colonialism and racialization, and advocate collaboration and self-critique. Furthermore, I am interested not only in the feminist interventions of the literary, but also in how these readings offer another way of remembering recent literary history in Canada. This project has therefore been concerned not only with individual literary texts but with the apparatuses of the discipline, from conferences to archives to film distribution, that teach us how to think about Canadian literary culture. I am not suggesting that a transnational feminist literary perspective helps us to access the real truth of a historical moment – of Marlatt in Penang, of conversations at a conference, of collaborations over a periodical, or of poetic intent. "History," Spivak reminds us, "rather than being a transcendental signifier for the weight of authority (or the authoritative explanation) is a catachresis, a metaphor that has no literal referent" (*A Critique* 331). This statement is accompanied by her immediate footnoted declaration that "This is of course not to say that nothing ever happens" (331). Different interpretations of what "happened," like literary interpretations, exist simultaneously and evolve in the collective conversations of the discipline; we do well to articulate the intentions, preoccupations and limitations that condition our particular investigations, as I hope to have done here.

This project is necessarily limited by the page count and time frame of the doctoral dissertation, but I have been pleased to note the multiple intriguing directions that each chapter could take. For instance, I would like to know how my burgeoning theorization of the ethics of archival literary work would be furthered by engaging with the archives of *Tessera* and of *Listening for Something*…. And, I wonder if third wave and transnational feminist perspectives are changing other Canadian literary regionalisms as they are shifting

the category of Prairie writing. Also, how might my thoughts on *Tessera* be shifted by a comparison with the collective from *La Théorie, un dimanche*? What about the relationship between Native writing and Canadian feminism, which I only touch on briefly via Lee Maracle's participation at *Telling It*? The issues at the crossroads of feminism, Canadian literature, and postcolonial and globalization studies are indeed vast and varied. They have permitted me to engage with some of the well-established keywords of Canadian literary studies (like regionalism, Atwood, the long poem, and "where is here?") and to further the productivity of others (like transnational feminism, complicity, collaboration and anti-essentialism).

When I began this project a few years ago, I did not realize that reading, studying, reflecting and writing about Canadian literature would ultimately feel like joining in on a rich conversation, nor did I realize that two of the important themes of my dissertation (collaboration and feminism) would be integrated into my own methodology and work life. Two instances of collaborative academic work helped to shape this project: my involvement in the TransCanada / TransQuébec PhD Student Workgroup and in the peer-editing group in the Études anglaises department at the Université de Montréal. To the extent that these academic experiences have involved respectfully, innovatively and self-critically collaborating in community, they have stimulated my thoughts on cross-difference and trans-border collaboration in feminist theory and Canadian women's writing. In addition, becoming a mother during my doctoral studies enabled me to think about feminism and academia in new ways. Motherhood is a recurring theme in my corpus (especially in "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" and *Venous Hum*), but more importantly: behind all of my thoughts on sisterhood, womanhood, gender, and the literary history of

Canadian feminism lie institutional and structural realities such as the availability of daycare and the national and provincial policies regarding parental leave that have implicitly and concretely conditioned my academic work manifest here. Following Heather Zwicker's recent presentation on the possibilities of the feminist university in Canada (and her evocation of on-campus daycare), I am inspired to acknowledge these embodied realities of my own subject position (Zwicker n.p.).[168]

The kind of optimistic sense I have of joining in on a conversation was described a hundredfold by Di Brandt, remembering her participation at the Women and Words/ Les femmes et le mots conference in 1983 (an event that I discuss in chapter two). "It was like a dream for me," she writes, "being there at all, meeting so many Canadian women writers. feminism was no longer an idea but a group of women talking, working together. it was like a dream, the beginning of feeling connected to other writers, women, becoming part of a women's community" (55). Just as Louve and Fritz-Peter's extravagant appreciation of multicultural policy is part of Mayr's overall critique of the management of disaporic citizenship in Canada, it is important to recognize the euphoria of experiencing a genuine sense of belonging in a community or movement, even as that recognition is necessarily tempered by the exclusions experienced by another. Similarly, I hope to have brought a good measure of both critique and appreciation to the literary moments and texts of this project. I appreciate the narrator of "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts"'s anti-colonialism while critiquing how she insinuates herself as a victim of colonization. I value Brand and Rich's transnational project, while suggesting that their own poetries challenge the gaps in their collaborative conversations. I read *Tessera* and *Telling It* as innovative and anti-

[168] Notably, Zwicker evoked Adrienne Rich and Virgina Woolf, both (non-Canadian) feminist writers referenced in this dissertation, who imagined the potentials of feminist university settings.

essentialist, but point out their gaps and silences. I make use of intersectionality to understand the dynamics of *Venous Hum*, but also to critique the significations of intersectionality theory in feminist studies. I look forward to future readings of these same texts and moments to further nuance my own understandings thereof. Canadian literary criticism, a collaborative conversation in its own right, continually invites us to re-read and re-valorise our canon – productively, I have argued, in terms of contemporary feminist thought.

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